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KARIN
SLAUGHTER

SNATCHED

A
NOVELLA

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Snatched

A Novella

Karin Slaughter



Dell

New York

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CHAPTER ONE

Special Agent Will Trent sat in the last stall of the men's bathroom between gates C-38 and C-40 at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. He stared at the closed stall door as he tried not to listen to a man availing himself of the urinal. Muzak played from the overhead speakers. Lady Antebellum's "Need You Now." At first, the song had reminded Will of his sort-of-new girlfriend, Sara Linton. And then it had played over and over again, at least sixteen times in the last five hours, and all Will could think about was jamming his fingers into a wall socket and electrocuting himself so he never had to hear it again.

There were many jobs with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that agents considered less than ideal—running background screenings for convenience store owners who wanted to sell lottery tickets, going undercover in bingo parlors to make sure old ladies weren't being ripped off—but no assignment was considered more odious than having to police the men's toilets at the busiest passenger airport in the world.

Sites all over the Internet listed the best bathrooms for male travelers seeking anonymous hook-ups. Hartsfield was always a prime location. Posters gave the best times for cruising, the type of guy to expect in which concourse, and the various under-stall contortions that were preferred at each location.

Will didn't mind what two consenting adults got up to. He just wished they wouldn't do it in public where kids could walk in. He usually spent the first half hour of every morning checking the cruising sites and anonymously posting that he'd seen a police officer staking out the stalls.

And still these idiots kept showing up.

Eighty-nine million passengers a year. Five runways. Seven concourses. Over a hundred restaurants. Twice as many shops. A people mover. A train station. Close to 6 million square feet of space that sprawled across two counties, three cities, and five jurisdictions. Seven hundred and twenty-five commodes. Three hundred and thirty-eight urinals.

This last bit of trivia was particularly galling, as Will was probably going to lay eyes on each and every urinal in the airport before he died.

All because he wouldn't get a haircut.

The GBI manual called for agents to keep their hair at least half an

inch off their collar. Amanda Wagner, his boss, had slapped a ruler to his neck a few days ago. Will was right on the line, but Amanda had never been one to let fact get in the way of her firm opinion. When Will hadn't rushed to the barber, she'd assigned him to toilet duty until further notice. Amanda was going to have to wait a good long while. Sara liked Will's hair long. She liked to stroke her fingers through it. She liked to drag her nails along his scalp.

Which meant Will was pretty much going to be the Samson of Hartsfield until the day he died.

A man walked into the bathroom. He said, "What I told her was, 'You don't like it, you can move out.'"

Will leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Over the course of the last few days, he'd learned that a surprising number of people talked on their cell phones while they used the bathroom. One of the janitors had told Will that seven million people a year accidentally dropped their phones in the toilet. Will prayed this jackass would be one of them.

No such luck.

The urinal flushed. The man left without washing his hands. This was no longer shocking, either. In fact, Will had witnessed worse lapses in personal hygiene over the last two weeks than he had during his entire adult life.

Will pulled out his cell phone to check the time. The numbers glimmered, then the screen went blank. A marathon session of Minesweeper had drained the battery into the red zone. He would have to charge it during lunch, which was blissfully close enough to justify abandoning his post. The business travel rush had come and gone. Another morning without an arrest. Will hoped his good luck would flow into the afternoon. He was probably the only cop on the planet right now who was happy to post a zero in the win column.

Will stood up. His knees popped. He stretched his arms up to the ceiling in order to coax his spine into a position more conducive to walking. A spasm nearly doubled him over. He wasn't built for sitting all day. He'd rather chase a chicken back and forth across a courtyard than do this. At the very least, it would give him some exercise.

Around ten every morning, Will usually had his second breakfast of a fried chicken biscuit. By noon, he was at Nathan's ordering a slawdog meal. At two, he visited the pretzel stand, and at four-thirty, he grabbed an ice cream sandwich or a Cinnabon on his way to the parking garage.

If he didn't die of boredom, he always had a heart attack to look forward to.

The stall door next to him opened. Reluctantly, Will sat back down on the toilet and waited. Lady Antebellum revved up over the

speakers. Will suppressed a scream. He'd thought he had another thirteen minutes before the track cycled on again. The song pierced his eardrums like an ice pick.

And then a child whispered, "Please, I wanna go home."

Will turned his head, though he could only see the wall next to him. There was something plaintive in the little girl's voice that cut straight through. Will leaned down. He saw a pair of white Hello Kitty ballet shoes with pink trim. Impossibly tiny ankles in white tights. The man behind her wore gray Brooks running shoes. The hem of his tan cargo pants was high, showing white socks.

"Just go," the man ordered. "Quickly."

Slowly, the little feet turned. The bigger feet did not.

Will sat up. He stared at the stall door in front of him. Phone numbers of escorts, tips on the best strip clubs. He knew them all by heart.

The man said, "Hurry up." He said something else, but his voice was too low for Will to make out the words.

Regardless, the little girl sniffed, which made Will wonder if she was crying. He also wondered why every hair on the back of his neck was standing at attention. Will had been with the GBI for fifteen years and learned early on that there was such a thing as a cop's intuition.

Something wasn't right here. He felt it in his gut.

Will stood from the toilet. He'd taped a Band-Aid over the automatic sensor to keep the toilet from flushing. He peeled back the strip and let the sound of a flush announce his presence.

There was a subtle change in the air, as if the man was suddenly on alert.

Will unlocked the stall door. His badge was looped on his belt. He slipped it into his pocket, not wanting to spook the guy. His Glock and holster had been checked with security, but his handcuffs were neatly stacked into the leather pouch at the small of his back.

Which hardly mattered. You couldn't arrest a man for snapping at his daughter. Half the population would be in jail right now.

But still—Will sensed that something was wrong.

He went to the sink and held his hands under the faucet so the water would flow. Will waited, staring at the reflection of the closed stall. He could still see the man's heels under the door. The running shoes looked new. The hem was torn at the back of the trousers. The man had used a stapler to tack them up.

Seconds passed. A full minute. Finally, the little feet went back to the floor.

The toilet flushed. Will waited. And waited. Eventually, the lock slid back. The stall door opened. Will glanced at the man, taking in the short brown hair, the thick black glasses, before returning his gaze to

his hands under the faucet. The guy was wearing a green jacket that looked a few sizes too big. He was tall, almost matching Will's height of six-three, but probably weighing in at twenty pounds heavier, mostly in the gut. He looked to be around fifty. There was no telling how young the girl was; maybe six or seven. She was in a flowered dress. The pink collar matched her shoes.

Will tried a casual, "How's it going?"

The man didn't respond. A nervous look twisted his features before he turned toward the exit, dragging the little girl behind him.

Will's peripheral vision tracked the man leaving the bathroom. At the last minute, the man jerked the girl by the arm and practically flung her into the concourse.

Definitely not right.

Will waited a few seconds before following them. He peered around the corner of the exit and saw the man glancing nervously over his shoulder. Was he looking for his wife? Was he just irritated? Was something else going on?

The concourse was filled with the usual travelers dragging suitcases and pillows along the tile floor. Will weaved in and out of them, hunching down because his height made him stick out among most of the crowd. He saw the man heading toward the escalator that led down to the interterminal train. Will pulled out his cell phone as he followed. He tried to scroll to Faith Mitchell's number, but the phone didn't respond.

Minesweeper.

Will cursed as he stuck the phone back into his pocket.

What would he tell his partner, anyway? That a man was being curt with his child in the bathroom? That the man didn't look like the type to make sure the pink trim on his daughter's collar exactly matched the pink on her Hello Kitty shoes?

If she was his daughter.

Will could see the top of the girl's head. Her hair was light, almost yellow. The man's hair was an unnatural brown, possibly dyed. Did that mean he wasn't the father? Will hadn't grown up with brothers and sisters, but he knew that the color of your hair could darken as you grew older. Will knew from the few photos he had of himself as a kid that his sandy-brown hair had started out nearly white.

Besides, the man could be her stepfather.

Whoever he was, he didn't take much care with the girl. At the bottom of the escalator, he wrenched her up by the arm, pulling her off the last two stairs, jerking her toward the train that led to the other concourses.

"Hey!" a woman shouted in protest, but the man was already heading toward the first car on the train. There were two sets of

doors. He used the far set, standing close to the exit, which meant he'd be one of the first people off.

Will could hear the familiar announcement warning that the train was about to depart. He pushed past the couple in front of him, hoping he looked like a normal, hurried traveler as he bolted toward the first car. Will used the second set of doors. A quick jump at the last minute got him inside before the final announcement came.

The crowd shifted as the train pulled away from the C concourse. The car was full. Will looked up at the display that showed the train's progress. There were three more stops before baggage claim and the exit.

Will tried to be unobtrusive as he searched for the man and the girl. A group of Delta pilots and flight attendants were clustered in the center of the car. Couples and single business travelers were packed tightly around them. Most of the occupants were looking down at their iPhones and BlackBerries. Will found the man at the front of the car. He was still standing directly in front of the doors.

The brown hair made sense now. It was a wig. The thick black glasses were probably fake, too. The man slid them up his nose as he stared at his watch. And then he looked down at his side. Will guessed he was looking at the girl. There was nothing like compassion on his face. Just anger, tinged with what looked like anxiety.

Will knelt down, pretending to tie his shoe. He peered past a woman's leg and saw the girl. Blonde hair like straw. Pale cheeks. Deep blue eyes with tears streaming down.

She looked straight at Will, and he felt like a knife was stabbing into his chest. She was obviously terrified.

Or was she just scared because she was in a busy airport, surrounded by strangers? Was she going to a funeral? Was she visiting a sick relative?

Will stood. He'd been stuck on toilet duty for three days. Maybe he was creating a circumstance where none existed. Maybe being a cop had made him too suspicious.

Or maybe he was right.

Will turned his back to the man and child. The pilot beside him was checking her email.

"Hey," Will said, keeping his voice low. Her look said she thought he was going to try to hit on her, but Will pulled out his badge, keeping it shielded in his hand so that the whole train wouldn't see. "I need your phone."

She handed it to him without question. Will knelt down again, pretending to tie his shoe. He waited for the crowd to shift, then took a picture of the little girl. He stood to capture the man's image, but the train jerked to a stop. The doors opened. The Delta crew got off.

There were only a handful of people between Will and the man now.

"You coming?" one of the flight attendants asked.

The pilot waved him off, saying, "Be right there. I forgot my flight plan."

The flight attendant didn't seem to buy the explanation, but the people crowding in on the train cut him off. The announcement came again, a tinny woman's voice warning them that the train was about to depart. Will glanced up at the display. They were two more stops away from the main terminal. Will dialed a familiar phone number and sent the picture of the little girl to Faith Mitchell, his partner. He handed the phone back to the pilot. "Thank you."

She responded with a nod, taking the phone. He saw her scan the car with thinly disguised curiosity. Most of the Delta pilots had trained in the Air Force. They were as proficient at combat as they were at landing a 747. The woman looked ready to back him up, though Will was hard-pressed to think of a legal justification for detaining the man.

The girl could be the man's daughter. Granddaughter. Stepchild. There didn't have to be a funeral or a sick relative. She could simply be tired and cranky from a long flight. For that matter, so could the man. Lots of people took their anger out on their kids. It was hardly a surprising occurrence.

The train slowed for the A concourse. Again, there was the usual flow in and out of passengers. The pilot gave Will an apologetic shrug before getting off the train. She glanced back at him before rolling her flight case toward the opposite train.

The doors closed. Will could feel someone staring at him. He counted off a few seconds, but he still felt scrutinized. After a few more seconds, he tried to casually look back. His eyes met the man's. There was a steeliness there now—no anxiety. No worry.

The train slowed again. The T concourse. Will stepped toward the doors and stared at his own reflection in the glass. His suit and tie made him look like every other passenger in the airport. Except for his lack of a suitcase. Will didn't even have a briefcase for cover.

He took out his cell phone and pretended to scroll through numbers. Faith was probably calling back the Delta pilot right now, wondering why the woman had sent her a photograph of a child. Will was seized by an overwhelming sense of futility. There was nothing about the man's actions that indicated anything was wrong. Lots of children cried for no reason. Lots of children wanted to go home, especially after a long flight.

The doors slid open. The crowd shifted to leave before the announcement reminded them that baggage claim was the next stop. Will got off the train. He kept his eyes on his phone as he walked. He

heard the doors close, the train lurch forward. He could feel the man watching him, and looked up at the last minute. The man stood in the middle of the car, feet apart to counteract the movement. His hand was gripping the girl's arm. The corner of his mouth went up in a knowing smile.

And then he was gone.

Will bolted up the escalator, taking the metal stairs two at a time. As usual, most people either didn't know or didn't care that they were supposed to move to one side for those who weren't content to stand. Will absorbed his share of nasty comments as he pushed his way to the top of the concourse.

The airport didn't advertise the exit through the T concourse, probably because the top of the escalator was already packed with people coming out of security. Most of them had absolutely no idea where they were going. They stood at the display boards with their mouths hanging open, unable to remember their flight numbers, let alone figure out how to locate their gates.

Will had to move people aside as he broke through the milling crowd. He went to the desk just past security and showed his badge to the TSA agent. And then he couldn't think what to say.

The guy asked, "What is it, buddy?"

Will thought about the little girl, the fear in her voice when she said she wanted to go home. The way the man dragged her along like a rag doll. That triumphant smile on his face as the train pulled away.

Will said, "I need you to call Commander Livingston and tell her there's a possible child abduction."

The agent grabbed the receiver and started punching numbers. He told Will, "Takes fifteen minutes to shut this place down."

"Green jacket, tan pants, brown wig. The girl's six or seven, flowered dress, white Hello Kitty shoes—ballet slippers. Can I borrow your cell phone?"

The man handed him his cell as he spoke into the landline. "Code Adam. I need Livingston pronto."

Will didn't wait around. He headed toward the exit, feeling the eyes of hundreds of cameras following him. Commander Vanessa Livingston was in charge of the Atlanta Police Department's airport precinct. Her officers augmented the TSA, addressing the many thefts, assaults, and petty crimes that you could expect in a place that saw nearly a quarter of a million visitors every single day. The cops manning the cameras had probably already tracked Will through the airport, on the train. There would be footage of the man and child. They'd probably show it at Will's formal hearing, where he'd be fired for harassing an innocent father and his daughter.

Will dialed Faith's number into the TSA agent's cell phone. She

picked up on the first ring.

“Mitchell.”

“Did you get the picture?”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“I think—” Will stopped, but it was too late to equivocate. “I think the girl is being abducted.” He mumbled an apology as he bumped into a traveler. “He had her in the bathroom. I don’t know, Faith. Something’s not right.”

“I’m on it.” Faith ended the call. Will tucked the cell phone into his pocket and quickened his pace.

A revolving door led to the South Terminal, which led to the parking decks, which led to the exit. Will didn’t wait patiently in line, instead swinging through the door before anyone could stop him. The terminal was filled with noontime travelers. Ticketing lines lazily snaked inside velvet ropes. Red Coats stood by to keep the traffic flowing smoothly. Will jogged toward the large escalators that delivered exiting passengers up from the train. He stopped at the chauffeur waiting area. The folks behind a USO sign started waving and cheering as some soldiers reached the top of the escalator.

“Uh-oh,” one of the chauffeurs said. “Trouble brewin’.”

A cop on a Segway zoomed by. Two more came on foot, hands to their guns to keep them from hitting their hips as they trotted toward the escalators. Commander Livingston was probably on her way down, too. She’d started on the force with Will’s boss a thousand years ago. They were still close friends. Amanda was probably already on her way to the airport from her downtown office. Faith would be putting out a Levi’s Call, Georgia’s version of an abducted-child alert. The entire airport was grinding to a halt.

Eighty-nine million passengers a year. Five runways. Seven concourses. Over a hundred restaurants. Twice as many shops. A people mover. A train station.

All shut down on a dime because Will had a hunch.

He felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. Will found himself in the peculiar position of actually hoping a crime had been committed.

The USO crowd cheered again as more soldiers arrived. Will glanced into baggage claim, wondering if he’d missed the man and child. The exit through the T concourse was faster, but Will had stopped for God only knew how long at security. He checked the other side of the terminal, the lesser-used North Terminal. A few stragglers stood around gaping at their phones, probably not realizing that the chauffeurs were on the other side.

Will turned back around. He nearly tripped on a suitcase a woman was dragging behind her like a tail. Her head was down. She was

reading her email, mindless of the fact that she was making everyone else dart out of her way. Which was a good thing, because Will would not have seen the man and child otherwise.

The green jacket was what finally caught Will's eye. The man was fifty yards away on the other side of the baggage claim area. Will saw the top of his head, the distinct bad wig and thick glasses, as the man rode the escalator down to the lower parking level.

A surge of people pushed against Will as he ran across baggage claim. A well-timed jump over a cart of suitcases was the only thing that kept him from falling flat on his face. That didn't stop people from yelling at him. One guy even grabbed Will by the arm, but he easily shook him off as he headed down the escalator and into the underground tunnel.

Up ahead, Will saw the man again. He was pulling the little girl. She looked as if she'd gone limp. Her feet dragged across the tile floor. She lost one of her shoes, but the man wouldn't let her stop to get it. The double glass doors slid open. The man looked down at his watch. He walked through the door, then looked down at his watch again before he disappeared from Will's view.

Will waved his arms in the air, hoping to catch the eye of whoever was watching the security cameras. He scooped up the girl's shoe as he jogged through the tunnel. Will slowed his pace outside the doors, keeping his distance as he followed the man into the underground breezeway.

As with the T concourse exit, the breezeway wasn't known by many travelers. It was a relatively private space, though it was about the length of a football field. A four-lane road separated the main airport from the bottom level of the parking garage. This time of day, the area was almost completely deserted.

Instead of crossing the road toward the garage, the man headed up the sidewalk, going in the same direction as traffic. Will put the little girl's shoe in his jacket pocket. The thing was so small that it fit in the palm of his hand.

Cars weren't allowed to stop underneath the airport, but many risked a ticket, idling in the breezeway in order to avoid having to pay steep parking charges. The exit was a straight shot ahead, and you could either merge onto the interstate or loop back around the airport. It was the perfect rendezvous point if you wanted to get out of here fast.

Will saw a gleaming red truck parked several feet ahead. A University of Georgia bumper sticker was on the fender, and an NRA decal was stuck to the back window of the cab. The driver was wearing a cowboy hat. Will saw the man spit into a red plastic cup as he walked by. The Cowboy nodded. Will nodded back.

And then, straight ahead, the little girl made a mewling noise as she stumbled. The man yanked her up violently. She struggled to keep up, walking on the tips of her toes. The man looked at his watch again. He glanced over his shoulder. Will tensed, but he was looking at traffic, not Will. The man studied a black Chevy Malibu that passed. Again, he looked at his watch, then back over his shoulder. Someone was supposed to pick him up; that much was obvious. Was he trading off the girl? Was he going to pick up another one and take her somewhere across the country?

The busiest passenger airport in the world. Over three thousand flights a day. Over two hundred gates. Over 130 destinations. Over a million ways to traffic children in and out of the city, if not the country.

Will looked behind him as a Prius hummed by. An Atlanta Police cruiser crawled up behind the red truck. Will motioned for the officer to stay back, but it was too late. The guy in the truck beeped his horn.

"I'm gettin'," the Cowboy called out. The truck's engine rumbled as he pulled away from the curb.

Will turned back around, searching for the girl and man, but they were gone.

"Shit," Will hissed. He scanned the breezeway, furiously searching for the green jacket, the bad wig.

The Prius. It had parked in front of the far exit. Will ran toward the car. He grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. The woman inside screamed, terrified. Her hands went to her face. Her foot slipped off the pedal. Will scanned the back seat. The cargo cover was rolled up. He could see the empty trunk.

The door nearly slammed on his hand as the woman sped off.

The cop was out of his car. He spotted Will and nodded toward the parking structure, indicating he'd go check it out.

Will jogged a few yards ahead, thinking he should search the second pedestrian tunnel at the opposite end of the breezeway. Maybe the man had gone back into the airport. He was probably spooked. The rendezvous point was compromised. If this man knew what he was doing, he wouldn't panic. At least not for long.

Will stopped running.

There had to be a backup plan. There was always a backup plan.

Will looked into the lower parking lot, his eyes scanning back and forth like a pendulum as he searched in vain for any sign of the man or girl. No bad wig. No green jacket. No cargo pants. No little tight-clad foot missing a pink shoe.

No Atlanta Police officer checking between the cars.

Where was he?

Will took out the TSA agent's cell phone. The screen showed a

missed call. Faith. Will hit the green button to call her back. He stared at the parking lot as he listened to the rings, wondering if the guy had already gotten into a car. If he had, there was no way he'd be able to drive out without being caught. Will knew the procedure. Code Adam. Missing child. It took a full fifteen minutes to shut everything down, but they started with the exit points. Each car would be stopped at the parking booths. Trunks would be searched. Seats would be pulled out. Names and licenses would be verified.

Faith answered the phone after two rings. "We've got a Levi's Call out. The picture's already on TV. We've blocked all the exits."

"I lost him in the lower parking deck, south side."

"They saw you on the security feed. A team is heading your way."

"I'm not going to wait for them." Will ended the call, tucking the phone back into his pocket as he crossed the street.

The red truck idled in front of the entrance to the parking deck. The Cowboy reached out to the machine for a ticket. The caution arm swung up. The truck rolled forward. Will followed it into the garage, using the truck as a shield. He saw groups of people heading into the terminal, suitcases and phones in their hands.

The only person walking away from the terminal was an older man in a baseball hat. His hair was white. He was wearing a black jacket and tan shorts. He was about Will's height, maybe a few pounds heavier. He had something gripped in his hand. Tiny, about the size of his palm. Will put his hand in his own pocket. He felt the little girl's shoe, and he knew it was the same man.

Where was the girl?

Will spun around, trying to find her. There was no one. Not even the Atlanta cop. The parking lot was suddenly empty of people, probably because no one was being let in. Will dropped to the ground, checking under the cars, trying to see two small feet, praying in vain that the little girl was playing hide-and-seek and everything would be okay.

But there was nothing. Nothing except the man. Will pushed himself back up. He saw the red truck making the turn onto the ramp leading up to the next level.

Then he saw the man. No more wig. No more baseball hat. No more glasses. He was staring directly at Will. He had the same snarky smile on his face. He was walking backward, hands in the pockets of his reversible jacket. His hairy legs showed where he'd unzipped the bottom part of his cargo pants to turn them into shorts. His white socks looked perfectly normal with his gray sneakers.

For a split second, Will found himself wondering if the man had worn the shoes because he knew he'd have to run. And then the answer became obvious. The man started walking faster. He kept his

eyes on Will until the last minute, then spun around and took off running up the ramp.

Will's feet pounded into the concrete as he gave chase. His fists clenched. His arms pumped. He felt the weight of the tiny shoe in his suit jacket as it tapped against his leg, like a child who wanted his attention. The little girl had his attention now. He should've grabbed her in the bathroom. He should've shut down the airport first thing. Why hadn't he listened to his instincts? Why had he cared about getting into trouble when there was even the slightest chance that a child might be in danger?

Will's ankle twisted as he rounded the corner and bolted up the ramp. The man was at least fifty yards ahead, passing the red truck. His shoes squeaked on the concrete as he made the turn up to the next level.

"Hey!" Will called, banging his fist against the back of the pickup. The Cowboy turned around, but Will was already climbing into the bed of the truck. "Go!" Will shouted. "Follow him!"

If there were questions in the Cowboy's mind, he didn't ask them. He floored the gas, tires sending up smoke as the truck accelerated up the ramp. Will tried to brace himself, kneeling down low, gripping either side of the truck bed for balance. At the last possible moment, the Cowboy wrenched the wheel, taking the turn up to the next level. Will was thrown to the opposite side of the truck. His shoulder slammed into the metal edge. There was no time to assess the damage. The man was already making the turn up the next ramp.

The Cowboy sped up again. Will thought he was going to try to run the man over. Apparently, so did the man. He abruptly changed direction, heading toward the exit stairwell with his head tucked, fists clenched.

Will felt his brain click off. It was a sort of survival mechanism, or maybe it was a death wish. The man was a few yards from the exit door. There wasn't much time. Will pushed himself up. He used the edge of the truck as a jumping board, catapulting his body directly toward the man.

Slow motion.

The man's hand was out, reaching for the doorknob. He turned. His mouth opened in surprise, or maybe horror.

Will slammed into him like a pile driver. The guy flattened out to the ground, arms and legs spreading from the force of 185 pounds of pressure. Will felt the breath leave his lungs. He saw literal stars behind his eyelids. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. That's when he saw it. Hello Kitty. Pink trim. The little girl's shoe was still gripped in the man's fist.

"All right," the Cowboy said. He had a Sig Sauer pointed down at

them. Nine millimeter. Will guessed he kept it in the glove box of his truck. Most of these guys did. "You gonna tell me what this asshole did?"

Will couldn't talk yet. He gulped air. His lungs rattled. Finally, he was able to force himself up. It was a challenge not to fall back over. Will's nose was bleeding. His ears were ringing. Every muscle in his body ached. Still, he forced his knee into the man's back, pinning him flat to the ground. "Where is she?"

The man shook his head side to side. His mouth opened as he gasped for air.

"Who did you give her to?" Will pressed his knee harder into the man's back. "Where is she?"

Low moans came from his open mouth. His head was turned toward his wrist. He was looking at his watch again. The glass was shattered. He made a strangled sound. Will thought for a second that the man was crying.

And then he realized he was wrong.

The man was laughing.

"You're too late," the bastard said. "You're too late."

CHAPTER TWO

Both the Clayton and Fulton County sheriffs' departments were called in. The Hapeville Police Department. The College Park Police Department. The Atlanta Police Department. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Every available law enforcement office with any jurisdiction over the airport had sent all available resources.

And still there was no sign of the girl.

Every car leaving the airport had been checked. North, South, West, Gold, Park-Ride—every vehicle in every parking structure had been examined and reexamined. The service alleys and cargo areas had been searched. Trash collection. Delivery vehicles. Shuttle parking. Rental car parking. Employee parking. Checked and checked again.

They found nothing.

All they had was the man, who wouldn't speak except to say that he would be acting as his own attorney and that his client had no comment.

His pockets were empty. No ID, no cash, not even a piece of gum. They hadn't found his glasses, wig, or the zippered-off legs of his cargo pants. He'd refused the offer of food and drink. He'd said he didn't smoke. He obviously knew these were common tricks employed by the police to obtain fingerprints and DNA, just as he obviously knew all he had to do was wait out the twenty-four-hour holding period, after which they had to either charge him or let him go.

Amanda Wagner hadn't transferred the man to the downtown jail. She was keeping him at the airport precinct, which was just as good as her home turf.

Will could tell his boss wanted to beat the man senseless. They all did. Every cop who passed the window looking into the cells seemed tensed, ready to break the glass and do as much damage as they could before someone stopped them. Not that anyone would stop them.

Will sure as hell wouldn't. It brought him nothing but pleasure to see the blood dripping from the man's mouth where Will had slammed his face into the concrete floor. If given half a chance, he'd pull the rest of the teeth out with his bare hands.

"Run it through for me again," Amanda told Will. She was normally composed, but today she was pacing, her three-inch heels catching on the cheap carpet inside the airport precinct offices.

"They were in the bathroom," Will began. "I heard them in the stall next to mine." He went through the story a second time, telling her every detail, from the photo he took with the pilot's phone to his leap

off the Cowboy's truck.

Amanda wasn't testing him. She was making Will talk it through in case there was something he'd missed, or something that she would look at differently.

Will could see her silently repeating his story back in her head as she watched officers running back and forth across the squad room.

Finally, she said, "We need to find that disguise, figure out how he managed to sneak her out right under our noses."

Will thought the "we" was fairly generous, considering the girl had gone missing under his watch. He was about to say as much when the door opened. The room snapped to attention.

Commander Vanessa Livingston usually kept her long hair braided into a bun that stayed hidden beneath her hat. Today was her day off, though, so instead of wearing her uniform, she was dressed in blue jeans and a flowing blue blouse. Obviously, the men who normally worked under her were taken aback by any sign of femininity in their usually severe boss. None of them could look her in the eye, though they all seemed to be in suspended animation as they waited for her to speak.

"Nothing," she said. "I checked the international terminal myself. The incinerator hasn't gone off yet." Will knew that customs was required by law to burn anything illegally brought into the country—usually fruits and vegetables. "I had one of my boys climb around inside, but it was just the usual crap people try to bring in."

"It was worth a shot." Amanda sounded as disappointed as they all felt.

Vanessa snapped her fingers at the men assembled in the room. "Report?"

The sergeant stood up. "The rental car companies and shuttles were a dead end. We called all the chauffeur services—legal and illegal. None of them report picking up a single adult with a child, two adults with a child, or a child alone."

She nodded for him to get back to work, telling Amanda and Will, "It's Monday. We generally see children traveling on weekends and holidays, so a kid would stick out."

Amanda walked over to the map of the downtown corridor that was pinned to the wall. She tapped her finger on various points as she caught Vanessa up on their actions so far. "Marriott. Embassy Suites. Renaissance. Hilton. Westin. Holiday Inn. We've got at least thirty airport hotels, more if you stretch to College Park. I've pulled in all GBI field agents and invoked an Action Alert so that local police forces can help search. This, as you know, is our problem." She traced a circle around I-75, I-85, I-20, I-285, all the major arteries that led away from the city. "We're assuming the girl was handed off

approximately forty-five minutes ago. That's enough time to reach the Alabama state line. If he's heading to Tennessee or the Carolinas, we've got approximately two more hours before he's out of our jurisdiction. I've alerted Florida in case he's going south."

"Screw that," Vanessa said. "We'll take care of these assholes ourselves."

She used her keycard to buzz them into the command center, which was euphemistically called the Cold Room.

Will let Amanda enter ahead of him. He felt the temperature drop as soon as his foot crossed the threshold. The Cold Room was kept at a cool sixty-five degrees so that the banks of computers could work at their most efficient levels. Every camera at the airport fed into this one room, which looked as if it had taken its design cues from NASA. Rows of desks were tiered like stadium seating. Each station had three monitors, and since that still wasn't enough, dozens more monitors lined the front wall.

Will guessed the room was the size of a basketball gymnasium, with an upper level that looked down on it all like a suite at a stadium. This is where Vanessa stood, Amanda at her side, Will behind them. They watched the real-time action of the airport, which was slowly revving back up.

Almost fifty percent of Delta's intercontinental flights laid over at Hartsfield, which meant their schedule had been shot to hell today. None of the passengers on the monitors looked happy. They were all taking it personally that their flights had been canceled or delayed. That a little girl had been snatched seemed a bad justification for missing their flight out. Vanessa's team had already broken up a nasty fistfight in front of one of the ticketing desks.

Vanessa explained, "We've got every inch of the interior facilities covered. The parking garages are spotty—we've got most of the pedestrian walkways covered and of course cameras are on every car that enters and exits. I've already instructed my people to run every image through the face recognition software."

Faith Mitchell stuck up her head from the sea of desks. She told Amanda, "We're ready to go."

Amanda glanced at her friend, on whose turf they were standing, but Vanessa only grunted, "Please."

Faith looked back down at the desk. She'd always been good with electronics. A few taps on the keyboard and she was in complete control of the system.

The largest monitor on the wall flickered, and Will saw himself peering around the bathroom exit. The next monitor in the row showed the man wearing his bad wig and glasses. He was dragging the girl across the concourse, making a beeline toward the escalator. Will

heard the tapping of keys as Faith isolated the images. Yet another monitor showed a frozen still of the man's face. His wig was skewed. His glasses were halfway down his nose. Then came the girl's face. She looked absolutely stricken.

Will felt all eyes on him. Looking at it from a distance, the crime was obvious.

Amanda mumbled, "It was a tough call," which was probably the most generous thing she'd ever said.

Faith hit some more keys. The middle monitor sped back up, tracing the path Will had followed through the airport. When Will exited at the T concourse, the train camera tracked the man until he exited at baggage claim. He struggled to get off the train quickly, but was beaten in the rush to the escalators because the girl was holding him back. Instead of climbing the stairs, he took the elevator. The corner-mounted camera inside the car showed him furiously pressing the button to close the doors even as an older woman in a wheelchair approached.

The doors closed in her face. Again, the man looked at his watch.

Amanda asked, "How late was his plane?"

"Fifteen minutes," Vanessa said. "It was one of the first out, so we know he didn't put the girl on a connecting flight."

They had already tracked the man back to his arrival gate in the C concourse. His American Airlines flight had left Seattle's Sea-Tac International Airport this morning. It was a smaller airport, but fortunately was in compliance with Homeland Security's new safety protocols. Every passenger who'd ever flown in a plane knew that their boarding pass was always scanned by the gate agent. What they didn't realize was that there was a camera trained on their face the entire time so that the footage could later be matched to a name.

Sea-Tac had emailed the digital files ten minutes ago. Four techs were already working on finding the man's identity.

Vanessa said, "Neither Seattle nor Tacoma PD have taken a missing child report matching our girl's age range in the last seventy-two hours. They've sent a notice to all schools within a hundred-mile radius. It's on the airwaves. Her photo's everywhere."

Amanda asked, "Seattle's what—a three-hour drive from Vancouver?"

"We've already coordinated with the Mounties and border patrol. If she passed through one of the four main checkpoints into the U.S., they'll find her."

"There's no telling where she came from," Amanda pointed out. "She could've been driven up from Tijuana, for all we know."

"LAX is running film for us. All the international airports from here to the West Coast. It's a needle in a haystack, but they'll comb every

piece to find a kid,” Vanessa said. “Let’s pull up her picture again.”

Faith did the honors. The photo of the stolen girl took center stage. There was a pause, then a flurry of typing as people went back to work. Will stared at the girl, his mind filling with all kinds of what-ifs. What if he’d grabbed her in the bathroom? What if he’d stopped the man, questioned him?

About what? Why he wanted the little girl to hurry up and use the toilet?

“Got him!” someone yelled. “Joseph Allen Jenner.”

The little girl’s photo disappeared and in its place was the man. He stood in line behind a group of travelers in matching yellow shirts, probably part of a cruise trip en route to Florida.

Jenner was wearing the same jacket, green side out. His hair was white. No wig. No glasses. No baseball cap. Will guessed from his bulky jacket that these items were in the pockets. Security couldn’t stop you for traveling with a wig.

Faith asked, “Where’s the kid?”

She was right. Jenner was alone.

“Scan back through the passengers,” Vanessa ordered.

“Already on it,” a man answered.

Faith turned back to her keyboard. Her work showed on one of the smaller screens. She was running Jenner through CODIS, the FBI’s national DNA database of convicted offenders. “Nothing,” she said, though they could see as much for themselves. She ran Jenner through the state system, then the regional, trying to find any record of arrest or registration as a sex offender. Finally, she Googled the man.

Pay dirt.

“He’s a tax lawyer,” Faith said. She clicked and scrolled through various articles in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, calling out her findings as she skimmed the information. Jenner wasn’t the type to fly below the radar. The guy did pro bono work for a children’s charity. He coached little league baseball. He was a certified lifeguard who helped out at the local YMCA.

“Typical,” Amanda muttered. “They always hide in plain sight.”

“Found the kid.” The Sea-Tac footage sped up, and a short, round woman was shown holding the girl in her arms. The child was obviously too big to be held. The woman nearly buckled under her weight.

“The woman is Eleanor Fielding,” the guy supplied. “Kid’s listed as Abigail Fielding.”

Vanessa asked, “Is she still with the kid when they land?”

The footage cut back to the gate in Atlanta. Will saw a line of passengers exiting the boarding door. They looked tired and confused, the way most people did when they sat in a metal tube for five hours

and landed in a completely different city. All of them searched for signs, looking for either the exit or their next gate.

Fielding was in the second wave of passengers coming up the jetway. She didn't look confused at all as she walked into the terminal. She headed off with purpose, almost jogging toward the escalators to the underground train.

Vanessa ordered, "Stay on the door."

The film sped up, but not so much that they couldn't make out the faces. The tech was good. The film was back at normal speed when Joseph Allen Jenner's face came on-screen. He was one of the last passengers off the plane. He was holding the girl's hand, dragging her along. Instead of heading toward the exit, he took her to an adjoining gate. A second and third camera tracked their progress as he led her to the back wall and forced her to sit in a chair. The girl was still groggy. She yawned, looking around with seemingly unfocused eyes.

"She looks drugged," Amanda noted.

"That's fairly common," Vanessa supplied. She'd worked at the airport long enough to know how these people operated. "We had a kid abducted on the West Coast last year. Drugged out of his mind. Flight attendants assumed he was sleeping, which is what you want from a kid on a long flight. He was passed off at the international terminal and on his way to Amsterdam by the time LAX tracked the internal flight."

"Did you recover him?" Will asked.

Vanessa nodded, but Will could tell from her expression that the kid hadn't escaped unscathed. Not many of them did.

Stranger abductions were rare—statistically, a kid was much more likely to be harmed by a family member—but the Internet was making things easier for predators. Will had been involved in a sting several years ago where a man took photos of kids on the playground and posted them to a private chat room. His plan was to snatch a kid that he could trade with another predator. It was a pedophile's version of the old Sears Wish Book. The man had been arrested, but these assholes were like cockroaches. For every one you caught, there were thousands hiding in the walls.

Like Joseph Allen Jenner.

On the security footage, it was obvious that the little girl was coming around. She was more awake now, taking in her surroundings, fidgeting in the chair. Jenner was visibly on edge. He kept looking at his watch, checking the time against the clock on the wall.

"He's waiting for something," Vanessa said. "Fast-forward."

The tape sped up almost ten full minutes. Jenner took another look at his watch and snatched up the girl by the arm. He tried to move her forward, but she stopped, standing rooted in place. Her mouth moved

as she spoke, probably asking to be taken to the restroom. Jenner looked furious. She was throwing off his perfect timing.

He dragged her into the bathroom, where security cameras could not reach.

"Where's Fielding while all of this is happening?" Vanessa demanded. "I want to know how she got out of here."

"We lost her," one of the techs said. "Fielding left through the North Terminal. We don't know where she went from there."

Will said, "Jenner disappeared in the South Terminal."

"Put more people on the parking exit videos," Vanessa ordered. Will knew more than two hundred cars had left the airport in the forty-five minutes between the Seattle plane landing and the airport being shut down.

"Fielding's got a record," Faith said. She pulled up the woman's mugshot. "Simple battery, child neglect. Two years ago in Jackson, Mississippi. She's off probation. No registered Atlanta address." The mugshot was replaced by Eleanor Fielding's arrest report.

"My God," Amanda mumbled. "She was a foster parent."

"We got her at the exit," the earlier man said. "She was one of the first cars we stopped. Fielding left through long-term parking, North Terminal. Black Mercedes." He flashed up the car, which had been captured on the security camera at the main exit to the parking area. The Mercedes was thoroughly searched. The trunk was popped. The back seat and floorboard were checked. A mirror was even dragged under the car to inspect the chassis. The woman stood there with her hands on her hips, conveying what a huge inconvenience this all was.

Will checked the time stamp on the footage. Twelve fifty-two. He remembered Jenner checking his watch twenty minutes later.

"There she goes," Amanda said as Fielding got back into her Mercedes and drove off. The camera tracked her to the split at the interstate. She took 75 South.

Faith said, "Fielding paid for the flight for her and the girl with her AmEx card. It goes to a local address on Lake Spivey. The Emerald Drive address matches her driver's license."

"Call Clayton County and tell them to bring her in," Vanessa told one of her men. The guy jogged toward the door.

Faith said, "She flew out yesterday afternoon, so it was up and back."

Amanda asked, "What about Jenner's flight?"

There was a pause as Faith looked up the information. "Up and back, too. He left three hours before Fielding did. His flights were booked with a Visa card," she said. "Belongs to Eleanor Fielding. Tracks back to the same Emerald Drive address." Faith gave an incredulous snort. "She used her SkyMiles to upgrade their tickets."

“Fewer questions in first class,” Vanessa noted.

“It was an overnight trip,” Amanda said. “Where did they stay?”

Faith did some more quick typing. The screen showed a credit card receipt. “Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center,” she said. “Two-hundred-six-dollar charge.” She pulled up the website for the hotel. After a few clicks, she’d managed to pull up the room options. “A two-double-bed room with the light-rail package that takes you to and from the airport is a hundred thirty-four bucks. With tax, meals, I’d guess that’d put them at around the two-hundred-dollar mark.” Faith went back to the credit card receipts. “No rental car on either credit card. Looks like they stayed at the hotel and waited.”

Amanda said, “And then someone delivered a little girl to their door.”

The room went silent. They all stared at the photo Will had taken of the little girl. Abigail. Maybe that was her real name. They would want to make sure she responded if called. These were the types of people who thought about such things. They booked the tickets ahead of time. They coordinated the exchanges. The Emerald Drive address was probably nothing more than a drop. Eleanor Fielding wouldn’t be there. No one would be there.

Will felt the enormity of the situation start to overwhelm him. The little girl had been so close to him in the bathroom. He could’ve reached out and grabbed her. He could’ve knelt down and asked her if the man was her father. He could’ve punched the guy in the face and taken her away from him.

Vanessa said, “He’s invoked legal counsel. We can’t talk to him. What’s your plan?”

Amanda didn’t hesitate. “We talk to his lawyer.”

CHAPTER THREE

Joseph Allen Jenner was a fifty-two-year-old widower. His wife had passed away three years ago. Her obituary listed natural causes, though a call to a sympathetic records supervisor at Emory University hospital revealed she'd had a heart attack at the age of forty-eight. No children were mentioned. Her only survivor was listed as Joe Jenner, lawyer, philanthropist, president of the Jenner Children's Foundation, which helped underprivileged children get access to after-school literacy programs.

Amanda sat across from Jenner in the interrogation room of the airport precinct. The walls were a crisp white, absent the usual scuff marks, cobwebs, and dirt that Will saw in just about every police station he'd stepped foot in.

She said, "I'm Deputy Director Amanda Wagner with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. This is my associate, Special Agent Will Trent."

Jenner held a bloodied rag to his mouth. His voice was muffled but clear. "I'm not required by law to say anything to you."

Amanda said, "You obviously know your rights, Mr. Jenner. I would expect nothing less from a tax attorney."

Jenner's eyebrow went up, though that was the only indication of surprise that they'd already learned his name. He took away the rag. "In that case, I'd like some ice water, please. And some aspirin."

Amanda nodded toward the two-way mirror. Will guessed Vanessa Livingston was repeating the gesture to one of her minions.

Amanda told Jenner, "You came in on American three-sixty-two this morning. You boarded the plane alone. Your partner, Ms. Fielding, boarded behind you. She was carrying a child whose boarding pass identified her as Abigail Fielding."

Jenner didn't comment.

"Ms. Fielding's credit cards were used to purchase three tickets. One for you, one for her, and one for the little girl. It is Abigail, isn't it? We don't know what to call her."

Again, Jenner kept his own counsel. He looked at the table. Will guessed his teeth were aching, especially the jagged bits where they'd been cracked in two.

Amanda asked, "Who did you hand Abigail off to, Mr. Jenner?"

Jenner gave a chest-rattling sigh. "Deputy Director Wagner," he began. "Surely, you're familiar with the law. You're not allowed to question me once I ask for a lawyer."

“As you are your own counsel, Mr. Jenner, I am speaking to you in the capacity of a law enforcement official to a legal representative. If you’d like for me to use more formal language, I’d be happy to oblige.”

He stared at her, his brow furrowed. Will guessed the man was more conversant with Cayman Island tax shelters than the loopholes of criminal law. Finally, he gave a crooked grin. “Very good, Deputy Director. It’s refreshing to speak to someone on your side of the law who actually has a brain in his head.” He corrected himself. “Her head.”

Amanda gave a tight smile. “What a wonderful compliment.”

He laughed. “You people think you’re so smart, but what’s really going to happen here? You can only hold me for twenty-four hours. You’ve got nothing concrete with which to charge me. It’s really rather pathetic.”

Amanda said, “Mr. Jenner, at this moment, your client—Mr. Jenner—is facing charges of child abduction, transporting a minor across state lines for the purpose of sexual activity, child trafficking, impeding a police investigation, evading arrest, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer.”

“Assault?” Jenner sounded outraged. “*He* attacked *me*. I was just walking toward the stairs, minding my own business.” He held up his busted watch. “This is a six-thousand-dollar Rolex.”

“We have a witness, a Mr. McGhee, who remembers it differently.” The Cowboy in the red pickup truck. Travis McGhee’s background check had been squeaky clean, but he’d told Will he’d swear on a stack of Bibles that Jenner had asked for it. That Will hadn’t gotten around to asking the man to lie was only mildly surprising.

“Witness, huh?” Jenner was still unimpressed. The smug look on his face made Will want to break the rest of his teeth. “Really, Deputy Director. You’re boring me at this point. Can’t you come up with something interesting?”

Amanda said, “Mr. Jenner, you realize your client was on camera from the moment he stepped foot inside the airport?” To send the point home, she fanned out the still photographs the techs had taken from the security footage. “This one is particularly interesting. See where your client is wearing a wig and glasses here?” She pointed to the photo. “And yet, here, it seems he took off the wig and glasses. And, of course, once we got him into custody, we learned that he’d reversed his jacket and changed his pants into shorts. What do you think a jury will make of that?”

“I doubt a jury will hear any of it.” He glanced down at the table again. “It’s always nice to have visual aids, isn’t it? Though who that man is in the bad wig is beyond me.”

Will followed his gaze. Jenner wasn't looking at the photos. He was trying to see Will's watch. Will resisted the urge to cover his wrist. The cuff of his sleeve obscured the dial.

Jenner said, "As I stated earlier, you can only hold me for twenty-four hours."

"That's correct," Amanda told him. "But a lot can happen in twenty-four hours."

"You're right," Jenner agreed. "Maybe my client will change his mind about that deal. You never know."

Will told Amanda, "Maybe we should check on Ms. Fielding."

Amanda had done this for so long that her face barely registered a change in expression. She said, "Yes. She seemed more talkative than our friend here."

Jenner couldn't hide his curiosity, though he tried. "Who's Ms. Fielding?"

"Your partner in the black Mercedes."

Jenner smirked.

Amanda said, "I'm sure she'll be more forthcoming. Ms. Fielding's been in the system before. She knows a jury won't look kindly on a second charge."

"She's invoked counsel," Jenner said. A good guess, Will supposed, if they'd actually been able to find the woman. "You can't talk to her without a lawyer present."

Amanda stood from the table. "We'll make sure you get your ice water, though I'm afraid it's against the law for us to give prisoners any drugs, harmless as aspirin may seem."

Jenner waved his hand, dismissing her words. "I'll be here when you want to talk again." He actually winked at her. "Shaking in my boots, as it were."

She left the pictures on the table. Will followed her outside the room.

Amanda waited until the door was closed. Still, she kept her voice low. "He's trying to see your watch."

Will nodded. "There's another hand-off. Fielding's supposed to meet someone else."

"It would make sense," Amanda said. "He's smug for a reason. You know he's done this before. They trade these kids like used cars, moving them around the country so no one can track them." Her tone held a low fury. "I'm sure Jenner's been on the receiving end a few times."

Vanessa joined them. She had a sheet of paper in her hand. "Nothing on our end. The Lake Spivey house is vacant. It's been in foreclosure for two years. There was mail in the box addressed to Eleanor Fielding. The neighbor's a bit nosy, says a black Mercedes

comes by once or twice a week and picks up mail. The car is registered to that address, too.”

“Smart,” Amanda said. “She’s using the house as a drop.”

“Fielding’s last known address is a vacant lot. I’ve got a gal at Social Security who’s going to try to give us a hand, but I’m not sure how long that’ll take.”

“Did you get an address on Jenner?”

“He lives and works at the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton. We talked with the head of security there, but he wasn’t willing to play ball, even when we told him a kid was involved. We can’t search Jenner’s apartment or office without a warrant. The attendant at the front desk is retired Atlanta Police. He accidentally left his logbook open for us. No visitors with kids. Not seeing Jenner—not seeing anyone. It’s not a child-friendly kind of place. No other addresses listed for him, so that’s a dead end. What about you?” Vanessa nodded toward the room. “You get anything out of him?”

“Just that he’s an arrogant asshole,” Amanda admitted. “Will thinks there’s another hand-off. I’m prone to agree. Jenner’s waiting for something. His watch is broken. He tried to look at Will’s several times.”

Will guessed, “He’s going to try to make a plea deal when he’s sure the next hand-off has happened. He’ll tell us where to find Abigail. It won’t be his fault when she’s not there.”

Vanessa provided, “All the airport hotels are checking out clean. We’ve sent agents there to look at footage with their own eyes. We’re not taking anybody’s word on this.” She crossed her arms. “Wherever Abigail is being hidden, it’s not in plain sight. What’re you thinking, Will?”

Will looked down at his watch. The hands showed two-fifteen. Will pulled out the stem and moved the hands ahead thirty minutes. “I’m thinking it’s time we let Jenner go to the bathroom.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Will kept Jenner in cuffs as he led the man down the corridor to the men's room. He expected protests or outrage, but maybe part of Jenner knew that he deserved to be duckwalked like a prisoner. Or maybe he was so certain he'd get out of this that he was content to suffer the small travails.

"Here," Will said, holding open the door. His sleeve pulled back. He saw Jenner note the time. Obviously, he liked what he saw. The snarky smile was back.

Will followed him into the small room. One toilet. One sink. An overhead fan that rattled like an old man's lungs. Will took out his handcuff key and removed the bracelets. Jenner rubbed his wrists, trying to get the circulation back into them. He asked Will, "What were you doing in that bathroom?"

"I'll answer if you do."

Jenner smiled, showing his cracked teeth. He winced from the pain. "You should feel lucky I'm not going to sue you for dental costs." He turned back to the sink, his eye on Will's as he turned on the hot water faucet. "I'm sure implants will run into the tens of thousands."

"You've got the money."

"Do I?" he asked. He must've read the answer in Will's eyes. "I guess you tracked my name through my boarding pass. I wonder how? I didn't have it on me. Maybe one of my fellow passengers gave up my seat number?"

Will shrugged.

"The credit card wouldn't go back to me. Google, maybe?"

Will didn't answer.

"It's amazing how privacy has gone out the window since 9/11. I'm surprised you haven't marked me for rendition."

"We're looking into it."

Jenner chuckled good-naturedly. He cupped some warm water into his hands, leaned down, and slurped. Will waited as he swished the water around inside his mouth. Jenner spat a pink stream of blood into the sink. He repeated the process twice before he stood back up. "I know Eleanor isn't talking. Her lawyer makes your boss look like a puppy dog."

Will doubted that, though he took on board that Eleanor Fielding probably had a woman for a lawyer. Will should've known better, but he was always surprised by the awful things some women got up to. He wanted to think it was for the money and not for spite. Or worse.

“She’s quite a piece of work,” Jenner said, meaning Amanda. “Thinks she’s smarter than she is. It’s a cop’s curse.”

Will wasn’t feeling so smart at the moment. So far, Jenner had managed to play him like a fiddle. Will tried to feed into the man’s ego, saying, “You’re smart.”

“That I am,” Jenner agreed. “It really is a burden sometimes—to be smarter than everyone else.” He indicated the toilet, which was side-on to the sink. “You mind?”

Will turned his back to the man, though he could still see his reflection in the mirror. Jenner’s gaze stayed down. He obviously wasn’t going to try anything.

Will felt for the stem of his watch. He inched the hands forward a bit more. It was a delicate balance. In the last twenty-four hours, Jenner had traveled across three time zones and back. He would be tired from the flights. Maybe exhausted from adrenaline and caffeine. The stewardess on his flight said he’d drunk at least a whole pot of coffee during the four-and-a-half-hour journey.

Even an innocent person would be feeling disoriented right now.

“Ahh.” Jenner let out a needlessly dramatic sigh as he finished at the toilet. He shook himself a few times. He flushed, then turned toward the door.

Will blocked his way, nodding toward the faucet.

“Of course. Where are my manners?” Jenner went to the sink. He pumped some soap into his palm, then held his hand under the faucet sensor. Nothing happened. “I hate these damn things. They never work.”

Will didn’t bother to agree with him. He waved his hand under the sensor. Still no water. Will tried again. The water came on hard and fast, splashing up on both of them.

“Always happens,” Jenner said, lathering his hands.

Will looked down at his pants. They were wet in the front, the same as Jenner’s.

The faucet cut off. Jenner said, “Towel?”

Will pulled a few paper towels out of the dispenser, making sure his watch showed. He caught Jenner’s reflection in the mirror. If the man was surprised that time was flying by, he didn’t seem to register it.

Again, Jenner turned toward the door.

Again, Will blocked him. He took out his handcuffs.

“Really?” Jenner asked. He sounded disappointed, as if they had somehow bonded in the toilet. Finally, he held out his hands.

Will shook his head. With exaggerated reluctance, Jenner turned around. He held out his hands behind him. It took everything inside Will not to wrench Jenner’s arms up so hard that both his rotator cuffs ripped. Instead, he carefully placed the handcuffs on the man’s wrists

and snapped them closed.

Will opened the door. He let Jenner walk out on his own steam, not pushing him or kicking him down the hallway. Will wanted so badly to move his watch forward, to inch away the time, but he made himself keep one hand on Jenner's elbow and the other at his side. Will put his hand in his jacket pocket. Abigail's little shoe was still there. He should put it in evidence. He should log it for trial.

Will wrapped his hand around the slipper. It almost disappeared in his grip.



Will sat on a metal bench outside the airport. It was a bright, sunny day, but he'd chosen the underground breezeway as the spot to lick his wounds. This was where he'd lost sight of Joe Jenner. The cop had pulled up. Travis McGhee had beeped the horn in his red truck. Will had turned around and Jenner and the girl were gone.

He held Abigail's shoe in his hand. The trim was coming off in the back, probably from being dragged. He should get some superglue and fix it. Will imagined these were the type of shoes a little girl might love. She'd want them back. She'd need them when she got back on a plane and headed home to her parents.

Will closed his eyes. He was hardly some kind of New Age freak, but he tried to imagine Abigail safe in her mother's arms. The little girl was thin and bony. Her mother probably would be, too. They'd have the same yellow-blond hair and blue eyes. Abigail's mother would hold on to her and squeeze her so tight that Abigail would never get away again.

That was what he wanted to imagine, not the truth, which was probably closer to a nightmare.

The Levi's Call was still in effect. Highway patrol had scrambled every cop on their payroll to scour the interstates and back roads. All the DOT bulletin boards over the highways listed Abigail's height, weight, eye and hair color, approximate age, and the time in which she'd gone missing. Hundreds of calls had already come in, but none of them had panned out.

Will looked at his watch, which was still ahead by fifty minutes. He kept checking on Jenner, inching the hands forward on his watch each time before he went into the room and offered a soda or a toilet break or just sat across from him and watched Jenner stare blankly at the wall.

Will would adjust his watch up another twenty minutes before he went back in with the man. Jenner was clearly exhausted. The last two times Will had checked on him, he'd been asleep, his head on the

table. He'd clearly lost track of time. Another five minutes skipped forward. Another ten. There was no telling what the magic hour was, but Will would keep leading Jenner along, moving the time ahead, until Jenner felt like he was safe.

Their only hope was that they'd have enough time left to save the girl.

Abigail had been missing for three hours now—at least that they knew of. There was no telling where she'd come from before that, whether or not a mother and father were looking for her. Eleanor Fielding had worked in social services. Maybe Abigail was a foster child.

So much for the image of Abigail in her mother's arms.

Predators tended to pick easy targets, and the foster system was so bereft of funding that caseworkers could barely keep up anymore. Many of them didn't have cell phones, laptops, or sometimes even offices. Seattle alone had seen dozens of child deaths in the foster system. Florida had a habit of losing their kids. Washington, D.C., had so many neglect cases on the books that they could barely adjudicate them all. There was no telling whether or not Abigail was one of the missing.

At this late hour, she might already be one of the dead.

The doors behind Will slid open. Faith sat down beside him on the bench. She had a radio in her hand. It was tuned to the Atlanta Police frequency, the volume turned down low. Will could hear the soft murmur of cops chattering back and forth.

Faith said, "Nothing," because she knew that was the first thing he'd ask. "Is that her shoe?"

Will handed Faith the ballet slipper with its pink trim and smiling Hello Kitty.

"It's so small." Faith pressed her lips tightly together. She had a daughter in diapers and a son in college. As hard as these cases hit everyone, they seemed to hit Faith doubly so.

Will asked, "How old do you have to be before you dress yourself?"

Faith sighed as she thought it through. "It varies from kid to kid. You're pointing things out that you want to wear around two, two and a half, but you can't dress yourself. Three or four, you're putting stuff on, but sometimes it's backward or you put the wrong shoe on the wrong foot. By five, you're pretty much able to dress on your own. Unless you're a boy. Then, you can't do it until you're at least twenty-five. Maybe thirty."

Will allowed a smile at the attempted levity, but all he could think about was Abigail picking out her clothes. This morning or yesterday or whenever it was, she'd taken the flowery dress, the matching tights and shoes, and put them on herself. He imagined her smiling at her

reflection in the mirror, maybe twirling around.

Faith interrupted his thoughts. "The FBI is chomping to take this over."

"I'm sure Amanda's happy about that."

"They're not being assholes," Faith allowed. "They're giving her everything she's asks for. Nobody wants this thing blowing up in our faces."

Will didn't say that he thought it had exploded a few hours ago. "I keep thinking of her with her mother."

"That's something good to hold on to. I'm going to think about that, too."

"You know it's not likely."

Faith said, "I don't care if it takes the rest of my life, Joe Jenner's going to end up in jail."

Will nodded, hoping that didn't end up being their consolation prize.

"I don't see how you managed to sit across from the smug prick without beating him senseless."

"It's what he wants," Will realized. That was why Jenner kept antagonizing them. Part of it was the lawyer's sense of superiority, but a greater part was the satisfaction he got from seeing the police so out of control.

Faith said, "It's the only crime I don't understand." She handed back the shoe. "Robbery, murder, even rape I can sort of get. But a kid?" She shook her head. "It's disgusting. Something is seriously wrong with a person who would do that."

Will didn't know what to say. It seemed pointless to agree with her.

He sat back on the bench and stared at the underground parking garage. He'd spent the last thirty minutes going through each step he'd taken after he followed Jenner outside. He did it again now: The cop. The Cowboy in the red truck. Running into the garage. Jenner had changed his appearance. How long did that take? Removing the wig and glasses would take two, three seconds, tops. Reversing the jacket and zipping off the bottom part of his pants while still holding on to the girl would be another matter.

Abigail wouldn't have just stood there while he changed. She would've run. Will was certain of that.

Regardless, they hadn't found the wig or any of Jenner's disguise in the many trashcans that were placed around the garage. The stairwells were empty. The spaces between cars absent his stash. Maybe Jenner's hand-off partner had taken everything, but the question remained: how did he or she escape? Every single departing car had been checked. Every exit had been sealed off.

Logic dictated there had to be something they were missing.

Vanessa Livingston had sent a team of men to run the license plate of every vehicle inside the parking structure. According to his driver's license, Jenner had a black Bentley Continental registered in his name. A quick call to the parking attendant at the Ritz-Carlton verified the Bentley was in the residents' area of the garage.

Abigail wasn't secreted away in a vehicle. She wasn't taken out in a service vehicle. She wasn't inside the airport. Was she locked in the trunk of a car? Did Jenner have another automobile hidden in the parking structure? Was his backup plan to simply let the girl suffocate?

Will's throat worked. He felt overwhelmed with the uselessness of it all. The fuzzy picture of mother and child was being replaced with a darker possibility. Will had seen dead children before. The image was hard to get out of your mind. It was the sort of thing you saw when you went to bed at night. It was the sort of thing that popped back into your brain for the rest of your life. Especially times like now.

Abigail.

Why hadn't Will taken her from Jenner? Why hadn't he at least talked to her in the restroom? So what if Jenner had ended up being her father or stepfather or grandfather or uncle. If Will had been on the other side of the situation, if Will had a daughter and some cop stopped him to ask what was going on, he might be mad at first, but then he'd have to appreciate someone looking out for his kid.

Faith, as usual, read his thoughts. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I should've talked to her."

"If I was in the airport and you leaned down to talk to my kid, I'd kick you in the face so hard your eyes would be spinning before you hit the ground."

"That's different," Will said. Women were more cautious around children. Especially women like Faith Mitchell, who ran a background check on her mailman because she thought he was too friendly.

"It's not different," Faith said. "You did everything you could, Will. We're all doing everything we can."

He hated the defeated sound in her voice, mostly because it mirrored his own feelings.

"I want to run through it again," Will said. Faith nodded, and he started back from the beginning, telling her about sitting in the toilet stall, peeling off the Band-Aid so that the flusher would go off. When he got to the part about waving his arms for the camera in the pedestrian tunnel, he stood up. He told her about finding the shoe, heading out to where they now stood in front of the exit doors.

Will took her down the sidewalk, continuing the story: The red truck. The Cowboy. The cop pulling up in his cruiser. Will's attention was diverted for a few seconds. He lost sight of Jenner and the girl.

Will turned to Faith, remembering, "There was a silver Prius."

"Four door?"

Will nodded. "I heard it pull up behind me."

"If you heard it, then it wasn't going slow," Faith pointed out. The car was virtually silent at speeds under fifteen miles per hour. "Anything else?"

"Black interior. White female driver. I saw through to the trunk. The car was empty." Will tried to remember what the woman looked like. It had all happened so fast. He'd wrenched open the door and scanned the interior of the car. "I scared the shit out of her," he said. "She drove off like a bat out of hell."

"Drove up there?" Faith indicated the steep turn at the end of the breezeway. The four-lane road narrowed to two as it merged into traffic from upstairs. The road then turned back into a six-lane stretch that allowed drivers to either loop back around to the South or North Terminal or jump onto the interstate.

Will said, "Call it in."

Faith already had the radio to her mouth. "Mitchell to Livingston?"

Vanessa Livingston's voice came back immediately. "Ten-four?"

"I need exit tape on a silver Prius leaving the South Terminal breezeway at approximate time of disappearance."

"Roger."

Faith dropped the radio to her side. "Where was the Prius parked when you opened the door?"

Will walked a few more feet and gauged his position. "Right here." He pointed toward the parking garage. "When I saw Jenner again, he was over there."

"Was that when you called me on the phone?"

"Yes."

"Okay, back up," Faith said. "You saw the Prius. You ran up to it?"

"Yeah," Will said. "I opened the door and checked it. No one was inside. Just a woman. Dark hair, I think. She put her hands to her face. Like I said, she was scared. Surprised." He shook his head. There was a reason cops hated eyewitness testimony. Nine times out of ten, it was wrong. So much had been going on when Will was chasing Jenner that he wasn't even sure the Prius was silver anymore. "Like I said, the car was empty. I could see straight through to ..." His voice trailed off. He looked up the road. He could see cars from the upstairs lanes.

Faith asked, "What is it?"

Will didn't answer. Instead, he jogged up the road, taking the same path toward the exit as the Prius.

There was a bend in the lower road as it rose to meet traffic exiting the main terminal entrance. To discourage pedestrians from walking

up the road and possibly getting hit by a car, the garden crew had planted a bunch of black locusts, a pollution-resistant bush that produces a creamy white flower and tiny, razor-sharp thorns at the base of each leaf.

Will pushed his way into the dense bushes, not caring that his hands were getting torn up. His jacket got caught on a long branch. The material stuck to the thorns like Velcro.

“What are you doing?”

Will ripped away his jacket so he could go farther into the bushes. “The TSA agent told me it takes fifteen minutes to completely lock down the airport. We were still inside that window when I caught Jenner. The Prius could’ve left just under the wire.”

“But you said the car was empty.”

“It was when I searched it.” Will stepped onto a branch, pushing down the barbs with his foot. “They both panicked. The Prius took off. Jenner ran into the garage.” He glanced at Faith to see if she was following his logic. “The road curves up right here. I was back inside the breezeway talking to you on the phone. This is the only place they could’ve handed Abigail off without me seeing Jenner or the car.”

“Or the security cameras seeing them.” Faith put her hands on her hips. “The next camera would pick up the Prius at the split that takes you onto the interstate.”

Will’s finger was bleeding. He wiped his hand on his pants, stepping deeper into the bushes.

And then he found it.

A cheap brown wig, a pair of black plastic glasses, two legs from a pair of zippered cargo pants and—worst of all—a little girl’s flowery dress with pink trim.

CHAPTER FIVE

"It's my fault," Will told Amanda. "I took my eye off Jenner. I gave him the opportunity to make the hand-off."

"We'll deal with your mistakes later," she said. "Tell me again about the woman in the car."

He shook his head. Each time he tried to summon up the memory, it was lost. "I think she had dark hair."

"Was she white? Black? Green?"

"White."

"Eye color?"

"She had on sunglasses. Maybe a hat?" Will didn't know if his brain was filling in blanks or not. "I don't know what she was wearing. I didn't see any tattoos or birthmarks. I think the car's interior was black. I don't know anything else. I was looking for the girl, and she wasn't there. That's all that mattered at that point."

Amanda seldom cursed, but she did now, saying, "Dammit, these people have been one step ahead of us all day."

Vanessa Livingston came out of the Cold Room. She said, "The camera loses the Prius once it turns out of the breezeway. It's picked up again on the merge. Whoever the driver was, she beat the shutdown by about two minutes. The Prius went 75 North, but that's all we know."

"Did you get the license plate?"

"Partial. Mud covered all but two numbers—three and nine, nonsequential. We're running it through the system. There are eleven hundred Priuses in the metro area. Half of them are silver. It's a popular color. We're drilling them down to the number registered to women so we have a starting point."

"Great," Amanda said. "Like we don't have enough walls to bang our heads against."

Will asked, "Did any of the cameras catch her face? Maybe we can compare it to passengers on the Seattle plane."

"No," Vanessa answered. "If she'd gone into one of the parking decks, or used the upper floor, that would be a different matter."

Will said, "What if it's Eleanor Fielding?"

Instead of shooting him down, Amanda said, "Go on."

"Her Mercedes left the airport. Maybe she looped back around, parked the Mercedes in a different lot, picked up the Prius, and came back to pick up the girl." Will remembered Jenner looking over his shoulder as he walked up the breezeway. The man was looking at

oncoming traffic.

Amanda said, "Jenner could hand off the girl downstairs, change into his outfit, then—"

Will finished for her, "Walk back upstairs, go into the main terminal, then take a taxi home."

"Covers them both," Vanessa said. "Except for Will spotting them, we wouldn't even know it had happened."

Amanda looked at her watch. "Will, it's time for you to go back in with Jenner. Add another half hour to your watch."

Will didn't immediately follow orders. "That's a big leap."

"Do as I say," she told him. "It might be the difference between finding the girl and finding her body."



Will sat across the table from Jenner with his hands clasped in front of him. His watch was on full display, the hands set ahead by an hour and twenty minutes. It was a big jump, but Jenner had been in the room for almost four hours. He'd spent most of the time either staring blankly at the two-way mirror or napping. There were no magazines. No TV. No distractions. His sense of time would be infinite.

At least they hoped it would be.

Will looked at his watch. He knew that Jenner hadn't had lunch. "It's way past dinnertime."

Jenner shrugged.

"I can get you a hot dog, chicken sandwich."

Jenner didn't answer. He was turned sideways in his chair. One leg was crossed over the other. Jenner's mouth had stopped bleeding, but he looked bad. Bruises were starting to form around his eyes and nose where his face had met concrete. Dried blood speckled his chin. A crease was down the side of his face where he'd fallen asleep with his cheek on his arm.

He didn't seem scared or anxious. If anything, he seemed bored.

Will forced out a heavy sigh. He sat back in his chair. "You wanna know why I was in the bathroom?"

Jenner's chin lifted. He gazed at Will out of the corner of his eye.

"It's part of a sting operation to catch men cruising for sex."

Jenner snorted a laugh, then seemed to think better of it when the pain shot through his busted nose. "I suppose the police don't have anything better to do."

Will ignored the observation. "I arrested a minister last week."

"Hmm," Jenner said.

Will didn't add how awful he'd felt parading the man out in handcuffs. There was a reason Amanda had assigned the job as a

punishment. Every day, Will felt like he needed to go home and scrape the filth off of him.

Then again, it was nothing compared to how disgusting he felt sitting across from the likes of Joe Jenner.

Will said, "You really should make a deal."

Jenner cleared his throat. "I've advised my client that it's best not to take legal counsel from the man who's trying to send him to prison."

"You were so easy to track." Will amended, "Your client was, I mean."

Jenner rolled his eyes at the game.

"And the hand-off in the parking lot. Pretty smooth. You know we found your disguise."

Jenner didn't move, which was evidence enough that Will had hit on something.

Will tried another lie. "Eleanor told us where it was. We've got her in the other room."

Jenner pursed his lips.

Will said, "My boss is talking to her right now."

"Is that so." Not a question, but Will could tell that Jenner wasn't so sure of himself now.

"You're a lawyer, Joe. You know that the first person who makes the deal always serves the least amount of time." He pressed a little harder. "Eleanor's already served time. She knows the system. She's going to flip on you. You know that. It's just a matter of time."

"Time?" Jenner looked down at Will's watch, then back at the two-way mirror. "I have plenty of time."

"Is that right?"

"I'm not talking to you anymore."

"Ever? Or just for now?"

Jenner's eyes met his, then went back to the mirror. Will had no idea who was behind the glass. They'd been playing this cat-and-mouse game for a while now. It was tantamount to watching paint dry.

Jenner cleared his throat. He crossed his other leg over his knee. His fingers tapped the table.

Will stared at the man. On the surface, he seemed as normal as any other fifty-year-old. Gray hair. A bit of a paunch in the stomach. Some wattle around the chin. That was the thing about these monsters—they looked just like everybody else. They took jobs that brought them into contact with kids. They developed covers that helped them elude capture. They spent every day of their lives working to bury their tracks, which was why it took so long to unravel the truth when you finally caught them.

Joe Jenner was a pro. He'd worked all of this out ahead of time,

exploring the angles, running through the various scenarios. He wasn't alone in this. He had a team. Maybe it was just Eleanor Fielding. Maybe it was more. Whatever their numbers, these people were sophisticated. Coordinated. They hadn't just started doing this on a whim. They had a well-timed plan. They had a backup plan. They had accounted for every variable except for Will being in that bathroom.

And that still might not stop them.

Was that why Jenner seemed so smug? You didn't get to live in the Ritz-Carlton and drive a Bentley by being unsure of yourself, but the man seemed to have a preternatural sense of superiority.

And why wouldn't he? Eleanor Fielding's name was on everything—the flights, the hotel room. She was the one who boarded the flight with Abigail in her arms. There was grainy footage of Jenner with the girl, but he could argue against that. Then there was the fact that Will had jumped him in the parking lot. Jenner's lawyer could easily claim that the police were conspiring to protect their own.

All they had was Will's testimony and some grainy footage. Jenner hadn't harmed the girl—at least not that anyone could say. He'd taken her hand when she got off the plane, led her to the bathroom, then led her to the parking lot. With a sympathetic jury, he might get two or three years. If they never found Abigail—never found the body—he might get less than that.

But then there was the question of time.

Jenner was obviously waiting something out. Was Jenner waiting until he was certain his accomplice had driven Abigail across state lines? Or was the man letting another abuser have his fun while Jenner ran out the clock?

There was a knock on the door that startled both of them.

Faith motioned Will out of the room.

"They found the mother," she said, walking down the hall. "Rebecca Brannon. Lives just outside of Post Falls, Idaho. Father was KIA in Iraq five years ago. Girl's name is Abigail Brannon. Seven years old."

A uniformed patrolman buzzed them into the Cold Room. The main monitor showed a television feed from CNN. A woman with blonde hair and pale white skin stood in front of a bank of microphones with various news logos on them. Both of her eyes were black. Her lip was busted open.

Will blurred his eyes, saw past the damage to the woman's face. He'd been right about one thing, at least. Abigail looked like her mother.

Faith explained, "The mom was beaten and tied up in her basement for two days. Said the attacker was wearing a mask, didn't talk, didn't do anything but knock her out and take the kid. Her boyfriend found her when he got home from a business trip this afternoon."

“Business trip?” Will asked.

“His name’s Paul Riggins. He services medical equipment for operating rooms,” Faith said. “Most of his business is in Seattle.”

“Seattle,” Will repeated.

“Riggins drove over to Seattle yesterday morning, came back today. We tracked him through his credit cards. You wanna guess the name of the hotel where he stayed last night?”

Will slowly turned to Faith. “The Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center?”

“It gets better: They searched his car. Found thirty thousand dollars in cash underneath the spare tire. All of it in crisp, new hundred-dollar bills.”

“New?” Will saw where this was going. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing distributed paper money in blocks that could be tracked through their serial numbers. “Tell me.”

Faith could barely contain her excitement. “All of the bills were distributed to the Sixth District.”

Will felt a matching grin on his face. The Sixth District of the Federal Reserve Bank provided paper money to Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and parts of Louisiana and Tennessee. He asked, “When were the bills released into circulation?”

“Last week.”

“Not enough time to make their way to Seattle.”

“Not even close.” She added, “And even if there was enough time, there’s no way all the bills would be from the same block from the same district by the time they made it to the opposite corner of the country.”

Will felt some of the pressure lifting off his chest. Given a little more time, Faith would be able to trace the bills back to a particular bank. If that bank had Joe Jenner as a client, the right kind of judge could be persuaded to sign off on a warrant to search Jenner’s accounts. Even the best defense lawyer in the world would have a hard time rebutting testimony from the chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. This was exactly the kind of evidence that juries loved to hear.

Will asked, “Is Riggins talking?”

“No. He lawyered up.”

“Please tell me the Idaho cops got a warrant before they searched his car.”

“Didn’t have to,” Faith said. “Paul Riggins is a registered sex offender.”

Will mumbled a curse. “Did the mom know that?”

“No.” Faith looked back at the monitor. Rebecca Brannon was sobbing into the microphones, begging for her daughter back. “But she

does now.”

CHAPTER SIX

Yet again, Will sat across from Joe Jenner. He kept his arms crossed, hiding his watch. They were two hours over the correct time now. It was a huge jump, but Jenner had been in the bare interrogation room for so long they were praying that it didn't matter. For Will's part, today already felt like one of the longest of his life.

Jenner finally let out a long, bored sigh. "Well?"

Will told him, "The district attorney for the City of Atlanta is waiting outside."

Jenner seemed unimpressed.

"She's ready to make a deal with you, Joe. Just tell us where the girl is."

Jenner did not respond.

Will laid out the evidence they had. "We know Paul Riggins took Abigail Brannon from his girlfriend's home yesterday morning. Last night, he delivered Abigail to you and Eleanor Fielding at the Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center. You gave Riggins thirty thousand dollars cash for the girl."

"You have no proof of any of this."

"We traced the serial numbers, Joe. You should never use new money for this kind of thing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Will laid out what Faith had told him a few moments ago. "The Federal Reserve in Atlanta sent a batch of new hundred-dollar bills to Bank of America's central distribution center. From there, the bank sent it out to their branches. It's money, so they're careful with it. They track the serial numbers. They know where every bill is from the second it enters the system to the second it leaves. Which is why we know that the cash you gave Paul Riggins was withdrawn from three different Bank of America branches: Buckhead, Ansley, and Peachtree Battle." Will crossed his arms over his chest. "We got a judge to let us peek at your accounts. Last week, you withdrew ten thousand dollars from three different accounts at three different branches: Buckhead, Ansley, and Peachtree Battle."

For just a second, Jenner looked surprised. "You can't prove it's all the same."

"Can't we?" Will had to resist the smile that wanted to come. He liked hearing the panic in Jenner's voice, no matter how quickly it dissipated.

"I was robbed."

Will asked, "Did you file a report?"

"I didn't have time."

"You just let thirty thousand dollars walk off?" Will shook his head. "Why'd you have it in the first place?"

"I don't believe that's anyone's business."

"Be sure to tell that to the jury," Will advised. "I guess you thought you were being smart by limiting each withdrawal to ten grand. Being a tax lawyer, you know that the bank is required to report any transactions over ten thousand dollars. And, of course, on internal flights, the TSA can't legally limit how much cash you travel with."

Jenner brushed some invisible lint off the sleeve of his jacket.

"Eleanor Fielding carried Abigail onto the plane. The girl was drugged. I imagine Paul Riggins has access to sedatives, seeing as he's in and out of hospitals all day. Abigail slept the whole flight. You were two seats back, but you kept an eye on her the entire time, drinking coffee so you'd stay awake." Will paused, making sure Jenner had time to absorb every word. "You took Abigail off the plane. You had it timed just right until Abigail had to go to the bathroom."

Jenner's mouth opened. Will was certain he was going to make a snide comment about small bladders, but he changed his mind.

Will continued, "Eleanor picked up her Mercedes at the North Terminal deck, then looped back around to the South Terminal, where she traded it for the Prius." This had been the final piece of the puzzle. A quick search through records had located the Mercedes just where Will assumed it would be. "Meanwhile, you took Abigail out of the airport through the underground breezeway. You were supposed to hand her off there, but you saw me and panicked."

Jenner's eyebrow went up. He obviously didn't care for the description.

"You had to improvise. You ran into the garage, hid behind some cars until I was looking the other way, then handed off Abigail at the top of the ramp. I couldn't hear the engine because the Prius was going too slow."

Jenner waited.

"That's where we found your wig and glasses. You changed your appearance in the hopes that you'd be able to walk back into the airport, grab a cab, and go to the next meeting point." Will leaned forward, crowding the space between them. "You can help yourself out of this."

Jenner remained silent.

"Tell us where she is, Joe. That's the only way you avoid serious jail time."

Still, Jenner kept quiet.

"It'll be easier for you if we find her alive," Will said, hoping to

appeal to the man's self-interests. "If she's dead, and the coroner shows pictures of her body, tells the jury what she's been through ..." Will braced himself for the awful things he had to say. "They'll show the bruises on her wrist where you grabbed her. It'll match the film of you dragging her through the concourse. They'll show the bruise on her knee where she stumbled in the tunnel. The film will back that up. They'll show her shoe. Her missing shoe." Will took the little slipper out of his pocket. He threw it on the table between them. "The jury will see the film of you jerking her up when she reached back for her shoe. Maybe the coroner will have slides that show the damage to her arm muscles where you wrenched it."

Jenner was looking down again, but his eyes were not on the shoe. They were on Will's watch. Will followed his gaze as the big hand moved to the seven.

Jenner flashed a self-satisfied smile. He said, "I want it in writing."

Will was so shocked that it was finally the appointed hour that he almost didn't know how to respond.

Jenner said, "I'll tell you where the girl is being held, but I'm not going to jail." He added, "And I'm not going on the registered sex offenders list."

"You know you can't avoid jail time."

"I can avoid anything I like if you want to find the girl alive. Get the DA in here." His eyes flashed toward the door. "I'd hurry if I were you. Tick-tock."

Will stood from the table. Instead of leaving, he waited for the door to open. It was quite a crowd for the small room: Anna Ward, the Atlanta district attorney; Vanessa Livingston; and Amanda Wagner.

Jenner held up his handcuffed wrists, telling Will, "Get these things off me."

Will fished into his pocket for the key. He took off the cuffs as Amanda shut the door.

"Mr. Jenner." Anna smoothed her skirt as she sat down at the table. She placed a digital recorder beside a closed file folder. A click of a button turned on the red recording light. "I'm Anna Ward, the city's attorney. I want to advise you that I'm recording this conversation. Can you please confirm for the tape that you've been read and understand your rights?"

Jenner rolled his eyes. "Yes, I've been advised of my rights. Yes, I am aware that this is being recorded. Yes, I'm aware that this is being watched through that ridiculous mirror on the wall."

"Thank you." She opened the folder, ignoring his sarcastic tone. "I hope you don't mind if I skip the rest of the introductions. As you know, we don't have much time."

Jenner smiled, showing his broken teeth. "On the contrary. I have

all the time in the world.”

Anna passed him the first document from the folder. The red, gold, and black seal of the Atlanta Police Department was in the top corner. “This authorizes your immediate release from the Atlanta Police’s Airport Precinct and guarantees that the department will not pursue any charges against you in this matter. It is signed by Commander Vanessa Livingston here at the bottom.” She turned to the next page. “This states that the City of Atlanta will not require you to register on the sex offenders list and that we will not pursue any further charges against you for the abduction, transportation, trafficking, or any other crime related to the minor known as Abigail Brannon.” She turned to the last page. “This specifies that the deal is strictly contingent upon you directing us to the exact location of the girl.”

“I can only tell you where she was taken.”

“We understand that, Mr. Jenner. If you refer to this line”—she touched her finger to the appropriate words—“you’ll see that your only requirement in honoring this agreement is to tell the truth about everything you know. If at any time you lie or evade questioning, or any information you give is found to be untrue, this agreement is void and you are subject to full prosecution.” She took a pen out of her jacket pocket and handed it to Jenner.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Jenner said. He took his time reading the documents. His eyes scanned back and forth along each line of each page. Will looked down at his watch. Five minutes passed before Jenner was certain he’d seen every possible loophole or trick in the one-page agreement.

“Okay,” he said, taking the pen. He signed each page, then handed the sheets back to Anna. She signed and initialed everything.

Amanda said, “Mr. Jenner, where is the girl?”

He pursed his lips, clearly enjoying the tension. “She’s being held at the Lakewood Arms Hotel. Room 215.” Less than ten miles away.

“Go!” Vanessa yelled, tapping the two-way mirror, though Will was certain her team was already heading to the hotel.

“So.” Jenner took the documents and folded them in two. “I suppose I should get out of your hair.”

“Did you touch her?” Will asked.

Jenner’s eyes went to Anna Ward. She told him, “You’re required to tell the truth, Mr. Jenner. That’s the agreement.”

“No,” he admitted. “Unfortunately.”

Will’s body tensed. Except for Amanda’s calming hand on his shoulder, he would’ve pounded the guy into the floor again.

“I think we’re done here.” Jenner tucked the documents into his jacket pocket and stood from the table. “When are you people going to realize you’re not smart enough to play these games?”

“Thirty thousand dollars,” Will said. “That’s all a child’s life is worth?”

Jenner looked at Anna Ward again. “The truth, right?”

She had to clear her throat before she could speak. “Yes.”

“I think that’s a fair sum when you factor in transportation and accommodations.” He gave a pleased sigh. “I know the Lakewood Arms doesn’t sound like much, but I had such a lovely night planned for our first date.”

Will’s fists clenched. “You bastard.”

Jenner had that familiar snarky grin on his face. “I’d hurry out to Lakewood, Officers. Eleanor was expecting me an hour ago. I’m sure she’s halfway to Florida by now.” He headed toward the door. There was something like a spring in his step. “Florida. That sounds like a nice place for a first date, doesn’t it?” He put his hand on the doorknob.

Amanda asked, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” he said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Be that as it may—” Amanda reached past Jenner and opened the door. An imposing man in a sheriff’s uniform blocked the exit—literally; he was as big as a refrigerator.

Amanda made the introductions. “Mr. Jenner, this is Phil Peterson, the sheriff for Clayton County. You can’t see behind him, but the Fulton sheriff and the FBI would like a word, too.”

“The—” Jenner pulled the documents out of his pocket. “I have your word that—”

“Mr. Jenner.” Vanessa Livingston did the honors. “Perhaps as a tax lawyer you’re familiar with the competing interests of various jurisdictions?” She paused, as if she expected an answer. “The airport compound reaches into the unincorporated regions of two counties and three cities.” She paused for effect, pointing at the floor. “You’re currently in the city of Atlanta. As the commander of this zone, I’ve ordered your release. You have my signature on that paperwork. I’ll do nothing to stop you from leaving.”

Anna Ward added, “Nor will I. The City of Atlanta will honor its agreement. We will not pursue charges against you.”

Jenner’s tone had a decidedly higher pitch. “I don’t understand.”

Vanessa explained, “The C concourse is in Hapeville, which is inside Fulton County. Your time in the underground train took you through the unincorporated parts of Clayton County. Your jaunt through the South Terminal breezeway was in College Park, which, again, is within the Fulton County limits. Sheriff Peterson won the coin toss, so he gets first crack at charging you.”

Amanda picked up from there. “The Georgia Bureau of Investigation would also like to talk to you regarding your transportation of a child

across county lines.” She added, “And, of course, since you traveled across state lines—many state lines—that puts you directly in the crosshairs of the FBI.” She mimicked Jenner’s snarky smile to perfection. “I trust you understand what I’m saying, Mr. Jenner. It’s always refreshing to talk to someone with a brain in her head.” She corrected, “His head.”

Sheriff Phil Peterson took out his handcuffs. He was almost a foot taller than Jenner and twice as wide. His deep baritone rumbled in Will’s eardrums as he told Joe Jenner, “Turn around, little man. I’m gonna let you see what it feels like to be dragged through the airport.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Will paced underneath the gates at the E concourse. There was a small waiting area inside, but he was too anxious to be confined. Even the wide-open space of the great outdoors wasn't enough.

He just wanted it over. He wanted Abigail with her mom. He wanted the bad guys in jail. He wanted to go home to his girlfriend and spend the rest of the night listening to the soothing cadence of her heartbeat.

Will stopped his pacing as a plane touched down. He watched it taxi down the runway, then turn toward one of the other terminals. He resumed pacing, thinking about all the people above him who were oblivious to what had happened today. It amazed him that the world was still spinning on its axis. Wide-body jets were parked nose-in to the gates, lining up like soldiers for international flights. Jetways were locked in. Catering trucks were extended on scissor lifts. Suitcases loaded. Flight attendants got on board. Occasionally, a pilot would walk out, examining every inch of the plane as part of the preflight safety inspection.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Will looked at his watch, feeling a moment of panic before he realized he hadn't bothered to set it back.

Abigail Brannon was safe. That was all that mattered right now. Faith had called from the hospital to let Will know that the little girl had checked out fine. A few scrapes and bruises were the only physical injuries she'd suffered.

The same could not be said of Eleanor Fielding, who'd had the bad sense to try to evade arrest. A battalion of cops had chased her through the Lakewood Arms. She'd finally climbed on the balcony and threatened to jump. When no one seemed interested in stopping her, she'd followed through on her promise. Unfortunately, the woman had survived the three-story fall. Her busted pelvis and legs would mend, but she'd spend the rest of her life in prison.

Just like Joe Jenner.

Will had to smile every time he thought about the shocked look on the man's face. It was always the smart ones who ended up tying their own nooses.

The doors slid open. A ground-crew worker came out. His orange vest hung loose around his waist. He gave Will a nod and headed toward the men waiting for the next landing so they could collect baggage off the plane.

Will couldn't pace anymore. He leaned against the wall. His back ached. His head was pounding. He was pretty sure he was getting lung cancer from the constant odor of jet fuel.

He was punch-drunk from exhaustion. And anxiety. And relief.

He took Abigail Brannon's slipper out of his pocket. He'd found some glue to fix the trim. He'd taken the other shoe out of evidence. He'd give them to Faith. He doubted Abigail Brannon would want to see him. She'd seen Will twice—in the bathroom and on the train. Both times she'd looked at him with longing in her eyes, begging to be rescued. Both times, Will had failed her.

At least she'd be in her mother's arms soon. Will would have to stop calling New Age believers freaks after this. He had visualized Abigail Brannon in her mother's arms, and that was exactly what was about to happen.

A wealthy Idaho farmer had donated the use of his private jet so that Rebecca Brannon could fly straight to Atlanta to meet her daughter. The charter pilot had been given special permission to divert to the E concourse so that the press couldn't bother them.

Will could only imagine what was going through the woman's mind right now. The flight was over four hours long. That was a lot of time to think about the fact that Paul Riggins, the man she'd been dating, had sold her daughter to a ring of pedophiles. He would probably spend the next ten years in prison.

Ten years.

That seemed light to Will. None of these bastards ever got what they really deserved. It was the one instance where Will was one hundred percent in favor of the death penalty. He'd advocate bringing back a firing squad if it meant he'd be the one to take out Joe Jenner.

The man was already working the angles. He'd hired one of the top lawyers in the state. He'd probably end up with five years. The rumors about what happened to pedophiles in prison were true, but still that was not enough to satisfy Will's desire for the man to be punished.

The doors slid open again. Amanda and Vanessa Livingston were shoulder to shoulder, talking in low voices. They'd worked together longer than Will had been alive. The women shared a bond in the way of soldiers who've been bloodied in the same battles.

Vanessa held a police radio in her hand. It squawked as soon as the doors closed. She put her ear to the speaker, nodding as if the person on the other side could see her. Finally, she told Will, "The plane just landed. Faith's on her way down with the girl. We've had some more enterprising reporters who booked flights so they can get into the terminal."

Amanda added, "Rumor has it they'll be at the T concourse."

Vanessa grinned. "I wonder who told them that?" She winked at

Will as she walked over to the ground crew.

Amanda stayed with Will. They watched a small jet plane make the turn toward the gates. There was a large green logo on the side. Will couldn't make out the words, but he guessed from the yellow stalk of corn in the middle that this was the wealthy Idaho farmer's plane.

Amanda said, "And people say the one percent don't do their share."

Will wasn't in the mood to joke. He wasn't going to be able to breathe again until Abigail and Rebecca Brannon were together.

The engine roared as the jet turned toward them, nose pointing at Will's chest. The plane idled for a second, then inched forward, stopping a few yards away. The engine wound down. One of the ground crew rolled out a blue carpet. The door was twisted open. A set of stairs came out like a tongue.

The pilot got off first, then an older man, probably a grandparent. He was leaning on a cane. The pilot held out a hand to help him down. Once the old man was on the tarmac, he turned around and held out his hand for the next passenger.

Will recognized Rebecca Brannon from her news conference. She looked even more frail in person. Her eyes were almost black. Her nose had been broken, as had her ankle. She handed down her crutch. Both men had to help her hop down the stairs.

Amanda told Will, "It's a good outcome."

"It should've never happened in the first place."

"Take the win, Will. Cases like this, that doesn't usually happen."

Vanessa had her radio to her ear again. She jogged ahead of the Brannons, handing Will her keycard. She told him, "Run to the top of the stairs to let Faith in. I don't think the mother can make it up."

Will didn't feel like the right person for the job, but he was too tired to argue. He went back into the building, taking a moment to get his bearings. The labyrinthine underbelly of the airport was more confusing than anything the public ever saw. Will found the metal stairs outside a propped-open fire door. He took them two at a time, his shoes thumping on the steel. At the top, he saw a closed door with a narrow window. Faith was looking down at him. There was a worried expression on her face.

She stepped back so that Will could open the door.

He stood on the top stair, unable to move. He'd been hoping that the girl was too exhausted to remember him. He'd been praying she was too focused on seeing her mom to stare at him with those same sad eyes he'd seen so many hours ago.

But Abigail Brannon was none of those things. Her eyes were trained down at the floor. She was quiet. Too quiet.

Will looked at Faith.

She explained, "They gave her something to help calm her down."

Will knelt down on the top stair so that he could look at the girl. He told her, "Your mom's downstairs waiting for you."

She didn't move—didn't appear to want to see her mother, or anyone else.

Faith asked, "Sweetheart, don't you want to see your mom?"

Abigail's small shoulder went up in a shrug. Her eyes were glazed over. Her face remained emotionless. She was dressed in a long T-shirt that fell past her knees. Faith had obviously bought it at the hospital gift shop. The creases were still in the material where it had been folded up in the package. A pair of blue hospital sandals were on her feet. The label was still attached. Her toes didn't even show. They were meant for a small adult, not a little girl.

Will took Abigail's shoes out of his pocket. There was a tiny flash of recognition in the girl's eyes. Wordlessly, she put her hand on Will's shoulder, kicking off a sandal, lifting her bare foot. He slid on the Hello Kitty shoe. She changed hands, lifted the other foot. He had to use his finger to help her heel slide in. Too much glue had made the back stiff.

He asked, "Ready?"

She didn't answer. Will finally made himself look her in the eye. He braced himself for that same sad expression, the one that cut straight through to his heart. Instead, he saw wonder.

"I saw you," she whispered. "I saw you from before."

Will felt a lump sticking in his throat. This time, he was the one who couldn't speak. He could only manage a nod.

"I saw you in the bathroom and I saw you on the train."

Will had to force himself to answer. "Yes," he agreed. "You did."

Her eyes started to water. He thought that she was going to cry, but a smile slowly spread across her face. "I knew you would save me," she told Will. "I saw you seeing me, and I knew that you would save me."

Will breathed out. He didn't realize until that moment that he'd been holding his breath.

"I knew it," Abigail repeated. "I just knew."

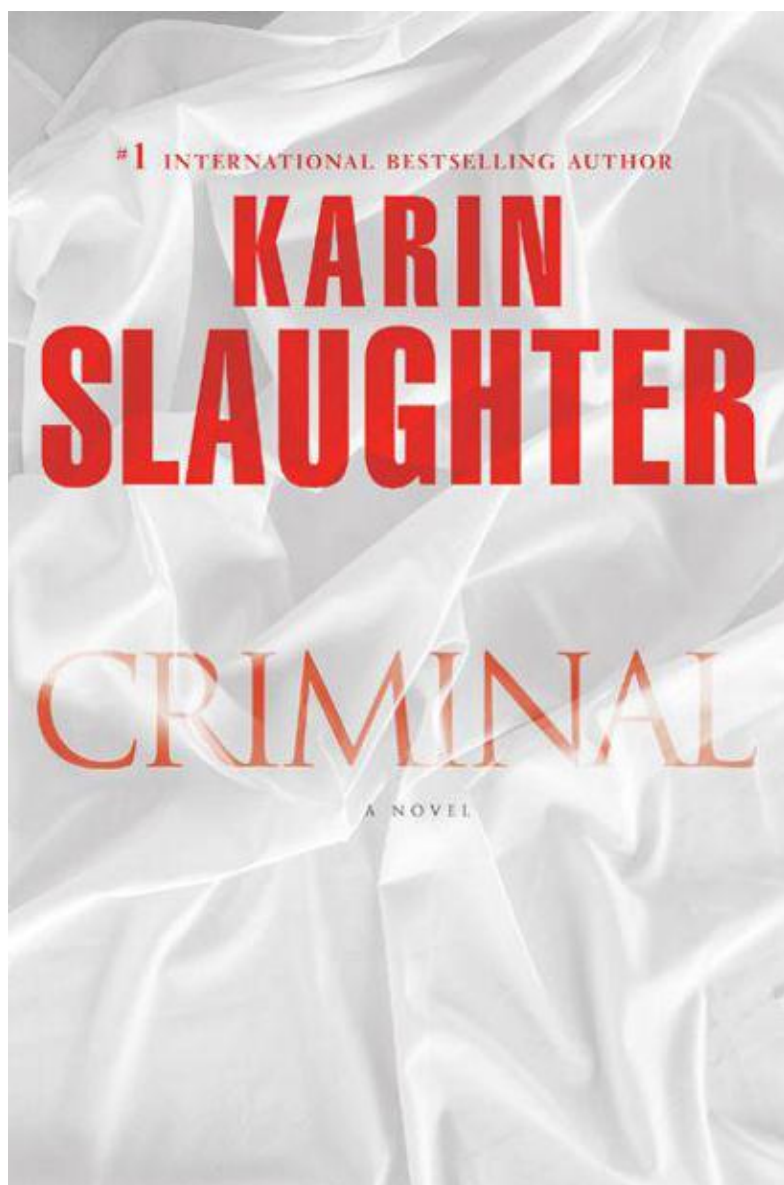
She threw her arms around Will's shoulders. He gently returned the hug. He could feel her bony elbows and wrists as he lifted Abigail up and carried her down the steps to her mother.

For Gina

KARIN SLAUGHTER is the *New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author of *Fallen*, *Broken*, *Undone*, *Beyond Reach*, *Triptych*, *Faithless*, *Indelible*, *A Faint Cold Fear*, *Kisscut*, and *Blindsighted*; she contributed to and edited *Like a Charm*. To date, her books have been translated into over thirty languages. She is a native of Atlanta, Georgia, where she currently lives and is working on her next novel.

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If you enjoyed *Snatched*, you won't want to miss *Criminal*, the next exhilarating thriller by *New York Times* bestselling author Karin Slaughter, coming in hardcover and eBook in July 2012.



AUGUST 15, 1974
CHAPTER ONE
LUCY BENNETT

“Good evening, sister.”

Lucy spun around, half expecting to see Henry, though he had never greeted her that way. There was a man standing a few feet behind her. White. Tall. Covered in shadow. Lucy’s hand flew to her chest. Her heart pounded underneath her palm. She knew better than to let some john sneak up on her like that. She reached for her purse, the knife she kept inside, but too late remembered that she’d lost everything.

“Are you all right?” the man asked. He was clean-cut, something Lucy hadn’t seen in a long while, except on a pig. His light brown hair was shaved into a buzz cut. Sideburns short. No shadow of a beard even this late at night. Military, she guessed. Lots of guys were coming home from Nam. In six months, this asshole would be just like all the other vets Lucy knew, wearing his dirty hair in a braid, beating down some woman and talking shit about the Man.

Lucy tried to make her voice strong. “Sorry, handsome. I’m done for the night.” Her words echoed in the cavern formed by the tall buildings. She was aware that she was slurring, and straightened her shoulders so he wouldn’t think she was an easy target. “Closed for business.”

“I’m not looking for business.” He took a step forward. He had a book in his hands. The Bible.

“Shit,” she mumbled. These guys were everywhere. Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, even some of the freaks from the local Catholic church. “Lookit, I don’t need saving.”

“I hate to argue, sister, but you look like it.”

“I’m not your sister. I have a brother, and you’re not him.” Lucy turned around and started walking. She couldn’t go back to Juice right now. Lucy didn’t think she could stand another beating. She would go to the hospital and make such a stink that they’d have to sedate her. That, at least, would get her through the night.

“I bet he’s worried about you.”

Lucy stopped.

“Your brother?” the man asked. “I bet he’s worried about you. I know I’d be.”

She clutched her hands together, but didn’t turn around. She kept walking. Footsteps followed her. Lucy didn’t quicken her pace. Couldn’t quicken her pace. The pain in her stomach was strong, a

knife cutting through her viscera. The hospital was fine for one night, but there was tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Lucy would have to find a way back into Juice's good graces. Tonight had been slow. Even Kitty wasn't bringing in much. Juice was all about cold, hard cash, and Lucy was betting this Jesus freak had at least ten bucks on him. Sure, Juice would still beat her, but the money would soften his blows.

"I want to call him." Lucy kept a careful pace. She could hear the man following, keeping his distance. "My brother. He'll come get me. He said he would." She was lying, but her voice was strong. "I don't have any money. To call him, that is."

"If it's money you want, I can give you that."

Lucy stopped again. Slowly, she turned around. The man was standing in a sliver of light that came from the lobby of a nearby office building. Lucy was too tall, five-ten with her shoes off. She was used to looking down at most people. This guy was well over six feet. The hands that held the Bible were huge. His shoulders were broad. Long legs, but not lean. Lucy was fast, especially when she was scared. The minute he took out his wallet, she would grab it and dash away.

She asked, "You a marine or what?"

"4-F." He took a step toward her. "Medical disability."

He looked capable enough to Lucy. He probably had a daddy who bought him out of the draft, same as Lucy's dad had with Henry. "Give me some money so I can call my brother." She remembered, "Please."

"Where is he?"

"Athens."

"Greece?"

She sputtered a laugh. "Georgia. He's in college. Law school. He's about to get married. I wanna call him. Congratulate him." She added, "Get him to pick me up and take me home. To my family. Where I belong."

The man took another step forward. The light picked out the features of his face, which were normal, even average. Blue eyes. Nice mouth. Sharp nose. Square jaw. "Why aren't you in college?"

Lucy felt a tingle at the back of her neck. She wasn't sure how to describe it. Part of her was afraid of the man. Part of her was thinking she hadn't talked to a guy like this in more years than she could remember. He wasn't looking at her like she was a whore. He wasn't proposing a transaction. There was nothing in his eyes that told her he was a threat. And yet, it was two in the morning and he was standing in the empty street of a city that pretty much closed its doors at six o'clock after all the white people went back to the suburbs.

The truth was, neither one of them belonged here.

"Sister." He took another step closer. Lucy was shocked to see the

concern in his eyes. “I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I let the Lord guide my hand.”

Lucy had trouble answering. Years had passed since anyone had looked at her with anything close to compassion. “What makes you think I’m afraid?”

“I think you’ve lived with fear for a long time, Lucy.”

“You don’t know what I’ve—” She stopped. “How do you know my name?”

He seemed confused. “You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You told me your name was Lucy. Just a few minutes ago.” He held up the Bible for emphasis. “I swear.”

All the saliva in her mouth was gone. Her name was her secret. She never gave it away to strangers. “No, I didn’t.”

“Lucy ...” He was less than five feet away from her now. There was that same concerned look in his eyes, though he could easily take one more step and wrap both hands around her neck before she knew what was happening.

But he didn’t. He just stood there holding his Bible to his chest. “Please, don’t be scared of me. You have no reason to be afraid.”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to help you. To save you.”

“I don’t need saving. I need money.”

“I told you I’d give you all the money you need.” He tucked the Bible under his arm and took out his wallet. She could see bills stacked neatly in the fold. Hundreds. He fanned them out in his hand. “I want to take care of you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Her voice shook. She eyed the money. There was at least five hundred there, possibly more. “I don’t know you.”

“No, not yet.”

Lucy’s foot stepped back, but she needed to go forward, needed to grab the cash and run. If the man sensed her plans, he didn’t show it. He stood there with the hundreds looking like postage stamps in his large hands, not moving, not speaking. All that cash. Five hundred dollars. She could rent a hotel room, keep herself off the street for months, maybe a year.

Lucy felt her heart banging against her shattered rib. She was torn between snatching the dough and running for her life and just plain running *from* her life. The hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. Her hands were shaking. She felt heat radiating somewhere behind her. For a moment, Lucy assumed the sun was coming up over Peachtree Plaza, streaking down the street, warming her neck and shoulders. Was this some sign from above? Was this finally her moment of salvation?

No. No salvation. Just money.

She forced herself to take a step forward. Then another. "I want to know you," she told the man, fear making the words slur on her tongue.

He smiled. "That's good, sister."

Lucy made herself return the smile. Made her shoulders curve so she looked younger, sweeter, innocent. And then she grabbed the wad of cash. She turned to run, but her body jerked back like a slingshot.

"Don't fight me." His fingers were clamped around her wrist. Half her arm disappeared inside his hand. "You can't escape."

Lucy stopped fighting. She didn't have a choice. Pain was shooting up her neck. Her head was throbbing. Her shoulder crunched in the socket. Still, she kept the money gripped tightly in her hand. She could feel the stiff bills scraping against her palm.

He said, "Sister, why do you crave a life of sin?"

"I don't know." Lucy shook her head. She looked down at the ground. She sniffed back the blood that dripped from her nose. And then she felt his grip start to loosen.

"Sister—"

Lucy wrenched away her arm, her skin feeling torn, like a glove ripping off. She ran as fast and as hard as she could, feet slapping pavement, arms pumping. One block. Two. She opened her mouth, taking deep gulps of air that sent stabbing pains into her chest. Broken ribs. Busted nose. Shattered teeth. Money in her hand. Five hundred dollars. A hotel room. A bus ticket. Safety. All the H that she could handle. She was free. Goddamnit, she was finally free.

Until her head flew back. Her scalp felt like the teeth of a zipper being wrenched apart as chunks of hair were snatched out at the root. Lucy's forward momentum didn't stop. She saw her legs shoot out in front of her, feet level to her chin, and then her back slammed down flat to the ground.

"Don't fight," the man repeated, straddling her, his hands wrapping around her neck.

Lucy clawed at his fingers. His grip was relentless. Blood poured from her torn scalp. It went into her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

She couldn't scream. She blindly reached out, trying to dig her fingernails into his eye sockets. She felt the side of his face, his rough skin, then her hands dropped because she couldn't hold up her arms anymore. His breath quickened as her body spasmed. Warm urine ran down her leg. She could feel his excitement even as a sense of hopelessness took over. Who was Lucy fighting for? Who cared if Lucy Bennett lived or died? Maybe Henry would be sad when he heard the news, but her parents, her old friends, even Mrs. Henderson, would probably feel nothing but relief.

Finally, the inevitable.

Lucy's tongue swelled in her mouth. Her vision blurred. It was useless. There was no air left for her lungs. No oxygen going to her brain. She felt herself start to give, her muscles releasing. The back of her head hit pavement. She stared up. The sky was impossibly black, pinholes of stars barely visible. The man stared down at her, the same concerned look in his eyes.

Only this time, he was smiling.

PRESENT DAY

MONDAY

CHAPTER TWO

“Is Ashleigh Synder still missing?” asked Will Trent.

Amanda didn’t move from the top stair. She was obviously still shocked.

He repeated his question. “Is the girl still—”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Go home, Will.” He’d never heard anything like fear in her voice, but he could tell now that she was deathly afraid—not of Will, but of something else. “Just let me handle this.”

“Handle what?”

She rested her hand on the doorknob, as if she wanted nothing more than to close him out. “Go home.”

“Not until you tell me why you’re alone in an abandoned building when there’s an active case.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not actually alone, am I?”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m not—” Her words were cut off by a loud crack. Panic filled her eyes. Another crack came like a shotgun blast. Amanda started to fall. She clutched the doorknob. Will lunged to help, but he was too late. The door slammed closed as the stairs collapsed. The noise rumbled through the building like a charging freight train.

Then—nothing.

Will jerked open the door. The knob rattled at his feet. He stared down into absolute blackness. Uselessly, he flipped the light switch up and down.

“Amanda?” he called. His voice echoed back at him. “Amanda?”

“Will?” Sara was on the landing. She quickly took in what had happened. “Give me your phone.”

Will tossed her the phone. He took off his jacket and holster and got down on the floor.

Sara said, “You are *not* going down there.”

Will froze, startled by the order, the unfamiliar sharp tone of her voice.

“We’re in a crack house, Will. There could be needles down there. Broken glass. It’s too dangerous.” She held up her finger as the phone was obviously answered on the other end. “This is Dr. Linton from the ER. I need a bus and rescue sent to Carver Street for an officer down.”

Will provided, "Street number's 316." He sat on his knees and leaned his head into the basement as Sara rattled off the details. "Amanda?" He waited. No response. "Can you hear me?"

Sara ended the call. "They're on their way. Just stay there until—"

"Amanda?" Will glanced around the hallway, trying to put together a plan. Finally, he turned around and got down on his belly.

Sara pleaded, "Will, don't."

He elbowed back until his feet hung down into the basement.

"You're going to fall."

He edged back farther, expecting any moment for his feet to hit solid ground.

"There are broken pieces of wood down there. You could shatter your ankle. You could land on Amanda."

Will gripped the edge of the doorjambs with his fingers, praying that his arms wouldn't give. Which they eventually did. He dropped straight down like the blade on a guillotine.

"Will?" Sara was in the open doorway. She got down on her knees. "Are you all right?"

Pieces of wood jammed into his back like sharp fingers. Sawdust filled the air. Will's nose had banged into his knee so hard that pinpoints of light exploded in front of his eyes. He touched the side of his ankle. A nail had scraped across the bone. His teeth ached at the memory.

"Will?" Sara's tone rose in alarm. "Will?"

"I'm all right." He felt his ankle squick as he moved. Blood pooled into the heel of his shoe. He tried to make light of the situation. "Looks like I was right about needing that tetanus shot."

She mumbled a shocking expletive.

Will tried to stand, but his feet couldn't find purchase. He blindly reached out, thinking Amanda was close by. He got on his knees, leaning out farther, and finally was rewarded with a foot. Her shoe was missing. Her pantyhose were torn.

"Amanda?" Carefully, Will picked his way across the shards of wood and broken nails. He put his hand on her shin, then her thigh. He gently felt along until he found her arm folded over her stomach.

Amanda moaned.

Will's stomach roiled as his fingers followed the unnatural angle of her wrist. "Amanda?" he repeated.

She moaned again. Will knew she'd have a Maglite in the Suburban. He dug his fingers into the front pockets of her jeans, trying to find her keys. He could send Sara out to the car. She would have to search for the flashlight. He would tell her it was in the glove compartment, or one of the locked drawers. She would spend several minutes looking for the light, which was exactly what Will needed.

“Amanda?” He checked her back pockets. The tips of his finger brushed along the broken plastic case on her BlackBerry.

Suddenly, Amanda’s good hand clamped around his wrist. She asked, “Where’s Mykel?”

Will stopped searching for the keys. “Amanda? It’s Will. Will Trent.”

Her tone was terse. “I know who you are, Wilbur.”

Will felt his body go rigid. Only Angie called him Wilbur. It was the name on his birth certificate.

Sara asked, “Is she okay?”

Will had to swallow before he could speak. “I think her wrist is broken.”

“How’s her respiration?”

He listened for the cadence of her breath, but all he could hear was his own blood pounding in his ears. Why was Amanda here? She should be out looking for the missing girl. She should be leading the team. She shouldn’t be here. In this basement. With a hammer.

“Will?” Sara’s tone was softer now. She was worried about him.

He asked, “How long before the ambulance gets here?”

“Not much longer. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine.” Will put his hand on Amanda’s foot again. He could feel a steady pulse near her ankle. He’d worked for this woman most of his career but still knew very little about her. She lived in a condo in the heart of Buckhead. She had been on the job longer than he had been alive, which put her age in the mid-sixties. She kept her salt-and-pepper hair coifed in the shape of a football helmet. She had a sharp tongue, more degrees than a college professor, and she knew that his name was Wilbur even though he’d had it legally changed when he entered college and every piece of paper the GBI had on file listed his legal name as William Trent.

He cleared his throat again so that he could ask Sara, “Is there anything I should be doing?”

“No, just stay where you are.” Sara used a raised, clear tone Will thought of as her doctor’s voice. “Amanda. This is Dr. Linton. Can you tell me today’s date?”

She groaned out a pained breath. “I told Edna to shore up those steps a million times.”

Will sat back on his heels. Something sharp pressed against his knee. He felt blood sliding across his ankle, dripping through his sock. His heart was pounding so hard that he was sure Sara could hear it.

“Will,” Amanda mumbled. “What time is it?”

Will couldn’t answer her. His mouth felt wired shut.

Sara took over, saying, “It’s five-thirty.”

“In the evening,” Amanda said, not a question. “We’re at the children’s home. I fell down the basement stairs.” She lay there taking

deep breaths of the pungent air. "Dr. Linton, am I going to live?"

"I'd be very surprised if you didn't."

"Well, I suppose that's as much as I can ask for right now. Did I lose consciousness?"

"Yes," Sara answered. "For about two minutes."

Amanda spoke more to herself. "I don't know what that means. Are you touching my foot?"

Will pulled away his hand.

"I can move my toes." Amanda sounded relieved. "My head feels like it's been cracked open." He heard movement, the rustling of clothes. "No, nothing sticking out. No blood. No soft spots. God, my shoulder hurts."

Will tasted blood. His nose was bleeding. He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth.

Amanda let out another heavy sigh. "I'll tell you what, Will. You get past a certain age and a broken bone or a cracked head is no laughing matter. It's with you for the rest of your life. What's left of the rest of your life."

She was quiet for a few seconds. From the sound of it, she was trying to keep her breathing steady. Despite the fact that he was obviously not going to answer, she told Will, "When I joined the Atlanta Police Department, there was a whole division assigned to checking our appearance. The Inspection Division. Six full-duty officers. I'm not making that up."

Will glanced up at Sara. She shrugged.

"They would show up during roll call, and if you didn't fix what they told you to fix, you were suspended without pay."

He put his hand to his watch, wishing he could feel the second hand ticking by. Grady Hospital was only a few blocks away. There was no reason for the ambulance to be taking so long. They knew Amanda was a cop. They knew she needed help.

Amanda said, "I remember the first time I rolled up on a signal forty-five. Some jackass had a CB radio stolen out of his car. We were always getting forty-fives on CB radios. They had those big antennas pointing like arrows off their back bumpers."

Again, Will glanced up at Sara. She made a circling motion, indicating he should keep Amanda talking.

Will's throat was tight. He couldn't force out the words, couldn't pretend that they were all just a bunch of friends who'd had a bad day.

Amanda didn't seem to need encouragement. She chuckled under her breath. "They laughed at me. They laughed at me when I got there. They laughed at me when I took the report. They laughed at me when I left. No one thought women should be in uniform. The station

would get calls every week—someone reporting that a woman had stolen a squad car. They couldn't believe we were on the job."

Sara said, "I think they're here," just as Will heard the distant wail of a siren. "I'll go wave them down."

Will waited until Sara's footsteps were on the front porch. It took everything in him not to grab Amanda by the shoulders and shake her. "Why are you here?"

"Is Sara gone?"

"Why are you here?"

Amanda's tone turned uncharacteristically gentle. "I have to tell you something."

"I don't care," he shot back. "How did you know—"

"Shut up and listen," she hissed. "Are you listening?"

Will felt the dread come flooding back. The siren was louder. The ambulance braked hard in front of the house.

"Are you listening?"

Will found himself speechless again.

"It's about your father."

She said more, but Will's ears felt muffled, as if he was listening to her voice under water. As a kid, Will had ruined the earpiece to his transistor radio that way, putting the bud in his ear, dunking his head in the bathtub, thinking that would be a cool new way to hear music. It had been in this very house. Two floors up in the boys' bathroom. He was lucky he hadn't electrocuted himself.

There was a loud thunk overhead as paramedics shoved open the front door. Heavy footsteps banged across the floor. The bright beam of a Maglite suddenly filled the basement. Will blinked in the glare. He felt dizzy. His lungs ached for breath.

Amanda's words came rushing back to him the same way sound had come back to his ears when he'd grabbed the sides of the tub and thrust his head above water.

"Listen to me," she'd ordered.

But, he didn't want to. He didn't want to know what she had to say.

The parole board had met. They had let Will's father out of prison.

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